DEFINING AND ACHIEVING UNIVERSITY STUDENT SUCCESS:

FACULTY AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

by

ANNE M. DEAN

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Vocational and Technical Education

Approved:

_____

William G. Camp, Chair

_____   _____

Susan B. Asselin   Delores W. Scott

_____

Felica Wooten Blanks

August, 1998

Blacksburg, Virginia

DEFINING AND ACHIEVING UNIVERSITY STUDENT SUCCESS:

FACULTY AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

by

Anne M. Dean

ABSTRACT

Many different parties are involved in trying to promote student success: faculty, student affairs professionals, parents, mentors, and students themselves. All may speak of their endeavors to work toward the goal of "student success", but if success is defined differently by each party, then each pursues a different goal. With this in mind, this study was designed for three purposes. First, the researcher sought to define student success based on the perspectives of student and faculty populations within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Second, the researcher sought to identify the barriers to student success. Finally, the researcher sought to identify strategies that would foster student success.

Qualitative methods were employed to conduct this research within the population of undergraduate students and faculty within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Eight focus groups were conducted in the spring of 1997 with a total of 27 students participating and two focus groups were conducted the following spring with 7 faculty participating. Questionnaires and the transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed for this study.

Findings showed that faculty and students have somewhat dissimilar perspectives on student success. Faculty participants were more interested in the academic elements of

being successful, while students placed more weight on what they felt were personal indicators of success, such as happiness. In terms of the barriers to student success that were discussed, students were much more likely to discuss barriers that were outside of their control, such as the classroom environment. Faculty, on the other hand, concentrated on the personal characteristics of students, feeling that students ultimately had personal responsibility for their own success. Based on the questionnaires, the groups were fairly well balanced and represented a fairly wide range of collegiate experiences.

Faculty and students have demonstrated through this study that they are quite valuable as a resource to consult when conducting needs assessments or developing student interventions. Many of the solutions that were suggested, interestingly, dealt not with the creation of new programs but with improving communication within the university to ensure the awareness of programs that already exist. Participants also felt that orientation activities for new students should be extended well into their first semester at the university.

From a research perspective, this study provided a great deal of insight into the ways that faculty and student perspectives are both similar and different. It would be interesting to see whether perspectives are similar across colleges within the university, or even similar between universities with similar characteristics. In trying to determine the nature of the collegiate experience, few would deny that no groups are more intimately involved in that experience than the faculty and students. Ultimately, then, the answers concerning the nature of student success must lie with them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Success is getting
what you want.
Happiness is wanting
what you get."
--anonymous

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

People have been pursuing education as a society in some form for thousands of years. The task of preparing people for the experiences of life has been subject to question and criticism probably since the time such subjects were first undertaken.

Background

As the educative process developed, the measure used to determine if knowledge and understanding had been attained became gradually more formal and standardized (Wilbrink, 1997). Also, with each society the definition of success in education has changed to fit that society's unique traits and philosophies (Pallas, 1993). That societal norm has affected chances for success at all stages of life, and this definition of success may have played a role in the development of social classes (Krull and Pierce, 1995). Another example of this education to develop and reinforce the class system can be found in the development and separation of vocational education from academic education in the United States (Wirth, 1971).

Both because the population of students is growing and possibly because of a continuing response to established societal norms, the measures of success throughout the educational system also became more objective. In time, grades became the mark of evaluation that was preferred, both by teachers and by their students. Standardized examinations became the measure by which the masses of students were organized by intelligence level, subject proficiency, and preparedness for college education (Wilbrink, 1997). However, institutional measures of success did not always match personal measures of success. Because of this, faculty or administrative attempts to improve

program delivery or support mechanisms may not always achieve the purposes for which they were intended.

Rationale

At a large university such as Virginia Tech, the struggle to improve student success rates has resulted in a great variety of strategies, with differing levels of effectiveness as a result of student participation (Blanks, 1997). Although many interventions are done with the intent of improved student success, participation levels impact the effectiveness of each intervention. It might be assumed that if student and faculty perceptions conform to each other, the intervention would be more likely to be successful. Determining how various populations perceive success, therefore, could have a marked effect on interventions that are proposed or pursued.

Theoretical Framework

There are many different psychological theories that attempt to explain how success is defined and actualized. For example, behaviorism might describe success in terms of actions that produce pleasing consequences in one's environment. From that perspective, for a person to achieve success would entail increasing the frequency of those actions that bring about positive results. According to cognitive theory, success is related not to environmental standards but to experiences that match internal perceptions. Again, achieving success would entail increasing the frequency of experiences that match personal ideals (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994).

A combination of these two theories known as social learning provides an image of achieving success that is determined through a combination of personal and social factors (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994). Many educational researchers have built on psychological

theories such as these in an attempt to measure which students meet their criteria for

success, which do not, and what makes the difference. In student development, this

theory is referred to as interactionism, which sees behavior as a result of personal

attributes, environmental characteristics, and the effects of interactions between person

and environment (Schroeder and Jackson, 1987). By drawing on elements of all of these

theories, this thesis attempted to explore the different personal and environmental factors

that could be involved in determining how success is defined and achieved.

Problem

One difficulty inherent in current educational research on student success is that

the measures by which success is determined are usually those that have been established

by the institution, and are usually quantitative (Abrams and Jernigan, 1984; Boutsen and

Colbry, 1991; Larose and Roy, 1991). These measures can include such things as grades

or credits earned, participation rate in activities, graduation rate, or the SAT score.

However, the sign of an educated person lies not only in these quantitative measures, but

in qualitative measures such as citizenship, interpersonal skills, and innovation. Very few

researchers have even attempted to measure gains that are made in these areas with a

postsecondary education.

Research into only the quantitative aspects of student success presents another

shortcoming. Although such a methodology is convenient for analytical purposes, this

research neglects the more fundamental issue of construct definition. One must consider

that researchers, professors, and other educational professionals may have a different

definition and idea how to achieve success than the students with whom they are working.

These differing perspectives on success may help to explain ineffective teaching methods or support programs.

A third difficulty is that in designing intervention methods, needs assessments are rarely conducted to determine what students actually look for in educational support to help them achieve success (Mann, 1988, Grevatt, 1992, and Wolfe, 1993). Currently, many programs are designed based either on other programs that are operating successfully at other institutions or on methods that "should be" effective based on the current literature. Once they are applied, such programs are evaluated again according to institutional guidelines which frequently mitigates toward simplistic quantitative measures and against less easily interpreted qualitative data from the students who are served. With students being merely passive recipients in many of these examples, it is no wonder that the effectiveness of various interventions often comes into question.

Many different parties are involved in trying to promote student success: faculty, student affairs professionals, parents, mentors, and students themselves. All may speak of their endeavors to work toward the goal of "student success", but if success is defined differently by each party, then each pursues a different goal. Combined with these misconceptions may be a sense of frustration because other parties are not working toward one particular vision of student success, even while they are working toward their own. If nothing else, far more energy is devoted to the task of helping someone achieve success than may be necessary. With this in mind, it is imperative that we adequately define success within the college or university population before we try to develop programs to foster that success.

Thus, the problem that forms the basis for this study consists of a lack of definition and understanding of the nature of student success from a student and faculty perspective. Only when this perspective has been analyzed can we truly appreciate the uniqueness of each particular population and then tailor programs to specifically meet each population's needs.

Purposes

This study was designed for three purposes. First, the researcher sought to define student success based on the perspectives of student and faculty populations within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Second, the researcher sought to identify the barriers to student success. Finally, the researcher sought to identify strategies that would foster student success.

Research Questions

With these purposes in mind, focus groups were conducted first with students from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech during the spring semester of 1997. That data was compared with data from faculty focus groups conducted in the spring 1998 semester in an attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

- How do students at different academic levels and faculty members define student success?

- What barriers do faculty and students at different academic levels see that are encountered in trying to achieve student success?

- What do faculty and students at different academic levels feel is needed to help improve the chances of student success?

- How do the perspectives of student success compare and contrast between faculty and students at different academic levels?

Importance of Study

This study attempted to research a fundamental aspect of student learning and development that could enhance the field of educational research and practice. Although most would accept that perceptions of success are probably different among different populations, there has been very little done to examine these differences. Because of this fact, these differences have also had very little impact on the development of programs that could improve student success.

If meaningful differences in perceptions of student success between these two groups were revealed as a result of this research, there could be significant implications for the way student support interventions are designed, implemented, and evaluated in the future. Instead of trying to assume the perceptions of success among a student population, there would be research to demonstrate the potential benefits of conducting a thorough evaluation of the needs and characteristics of a specific student population before program interventions are implemented. Both implementation and evaluation would be based on these initial recommendations from students instead of institutional directives. Finally, evaluations would be provided through qualitative feedback from the students rather than through quantitative survey reports that would again place students in a more passive position.

Finally, this research could provide an excellent starting point for those who wish to research the implications that utilizing these different perceptions of success would have on future interventions designed to foster success among students. It may be, for example,

that students with similar personality types or backgrounds may have similar perceptions of success and similar needs.

Limitations

As with any research, this study has limitations to consider. First, the population from which the research sample was drawn consisted of faculty and students from only one college within Virginia Tech's university structure. The results from this study, therefore, provide only a template on which to base further research and cannot be applied to the general populations of either students or faculty.

Second, only a small percentage of this population will actually be included in this study. Therefore, the results of the analysis may not accurately reflect the perceptions of the whole population.

Finally, the reader must remember that the makeup of the population of university students changes every year due to both graduation, attrition and admission. In order for the recommendations based on the study to remain valid, the perceptions of this population must be re-evaluated after every few years to ensure that any changes within the population are reflected in appropriate changes in the interventions that are offered. If patterns within certain populations can be discovered through this continued evaluation, however, then it may be appropriate to establish general perceptions to provide a preliminary structure on which to frame future interventions.

Definitions

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines success as a "degree or measure of succeeding" or a "favorable or desired outcome" (1987, p.1178). Even a definition that seems as simple as this leads to two very complex questions. First, what

was this outcome? Second, how was this outcome achieved? When student success in higher education is the topic of discussion, most of the intervening parties are quick to determine the methods of achieving success, assuming that the desired result in education is an understood point. As will be addressed throughout this thesis, this is not the case at all.

"Student" in this study refers to undergraduates in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. In other words, all students eligible to participate in these focus groups were required to be enrolled in degree programs offered by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the time the focus groups were held. This was determined through access to information databases maintained by the Office of Institutional Research and Policy Analysis. Because the focus groups were conducted in the spring of 1997, students typically would have entered the university between the fall of 1992 and the fall of 1996.

"Faculty" refers to those in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech who are instructional personnel holding professorial rank and assigned primarily teaching responsibilities at the main campus in Blacksburg, Virginia. Again, these main teaching responsibilities were required to be within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences to be eligible for participation. This was determined through access to information databases maintained by the Office of Institutional Research and Policy Analysis.

"Focus group" refers to group interviews that were conducted in the spring semesters of 1997 and 1998. These interviews consisted of questions that were meant to solicit responses from all participants as a way to stimulate further discussion of the

subjects in focus. In this study, the foci of these group interviews were a definition of

student success, the barriers to student success, and solutions to alleviate these barriers

that could improve the chances for student success.   The groups were moderated by a

facilitator and monitored by a co-facilitator who was also present during the focus group

sessions. The process in which these focus groups were conducted is described in Chapter

3.

All other definitions, as is consistent with the purpose of this research, will be

supplied by the participants of our study as discovered through analysis of the focus group

interviews conducted.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter highlights various facets of student success. Also in this literature review are the methods employed in conducting this research. The complexity of the issue of student success and the potential benefits from an increased understanding will be evident.

Psychological Foundations of Success

The nature of success has intrigued many of those working to understand the nature of the human mind. For some success is a process, for others it is considered a product (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994). This is why to say someone is being successful is not the equivalent to saying that someone is a success. When one begins to analyze the complexity of these different characteristics of success in the context of education, one finds that there are several different theories that attempt to describe this rather enigmatic construct.

Probably the most classical psychological theories are those of behaviorism and cognitive learning. Success from a behaviorist perspective would be seen as a product of a particular action--the intended response to a particular stimulus (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994). For students to be successful under this theory they would have to learn, through trial and error, what behaviors were punished (failures) and which were rewarded (successes). Rewards might be seen in such things as high grades or leadership positions. At the end of students' educational careers, then, their level of overall success would simply be determined by the number of individual successes that they accrued over the course of their college years.

Success from the cognitive perspective would be seen as internally rather than externally based, in that a person's own mental development determined success in an activity more than any educational stimuli that might be presented to guide that activity (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994). In other words, if students are not cognitively ready to understand language, then no matter what kind of effort is put into their education, they will not be able to read. For cognitivists, then, educational success entails reaching one's individual potential--something that is much less easily determined by the quantitative measures employed by behaviorists. Although this is a very interesting perspective to take, it would be nearly impossible for an institution to evaluate students effectively using this theory.

To expand a little on this cognitive theory, a word must be said on the phenomenon of success expectancy. Simply put, after students develop a perception of success, then they evaluate whether they feel they can achieve that success. Regardless of ability or opportunity, these expectations have a definite effect on students' performance. This expectancy seems to be determined by students' levels of self-confidence and possible pressures to maintain traditional gender roles (Gigliotti and Secrest, 1988). It has even been observed that some students who do attain high levels of achievement in spite of these low expectations actually suffer from feelings of deception, known as the Impostor Phenomenon (Milton and Mattox, 1988). Taking these additional psychological attributes into account could add a serious challenge for those who try to influence student success using external motivators.

Researchers who combine personal effects with environmental effects to describe success and achievement take a more comprehensive approach to this subject of student

success. Moos (1979) developed a framework based on the interactions of these effects in

order to evaluate the college experience from a more holistic standpoint. Known as a

social-ecological model, Moos described a student's experience at a college or university

in terms of the institution's environmental characteristics, the individual's characteristics,

the individual's perceptions of the environment, and, lastly, the individual's response to the

environment. It is this interaction that defines the social climate of the institution, with

success referring to a good match between the student and the institution which would

result in a productive experience for the student, in whatever way that was defined.

A further example of this type of research involves the "choice theory" that was

developed by Glasser (1996) as a reform proposal for middle schools. In this research

Glasser observed that students choose, either consciously or unconsciously, to pursue

successful behavior based on how experiences in their environment affect their perceptions

of positive and negative actions. In other words, if participation in an experience has

brought satisfaction to one of what Glasser calls the four psychological needs of

belonging, power, freedom, and fun, then in the future similar actions will be pursued

because the end is viewed as successful. This theory has been used with much success at

the middle school level, but it does not appear to have been implemented in higher

education institutions.

To provide some insight into this complexity, Lindren (1969) described college

success by discussing what he sees as the two major reasons for failure as a student. The

first, an environmental cause, concerns lack of skills with which to properly meet the many

challenges presented by the postsecondary experience. The second, a personal cause, is

due to a poor attitude with which to approach postsecondary education that discourages

both motivation and persistence. Student success, then, is not just a matter of knowing how, but also, and possibly more importantly, knowing why.

Arnold (1995) also expounded on the multifaceted nature of student success through a longitudinal study she made of high school valedictorians. As the students in her study went through their postsecondary education, she discovered that they measured success in four different dimensions or levels. The first and most basic determinant of success was through their level of academic proficiency as measured by grades, awards, and the like. The second level went beyond the academic realm to professional success-- how well their postsecondary studies had actually helped them in their future adult experiences. Third, the researcher investigated the level of satisfaction that each of her participants felt in their present situation. If they felt they had been successful based on their own personal measures, then this perception would override the other external measures that were mentioned above. The highest level of success, according to Arnold, comes when an individual's ideal future becomes their present. If one is living up to his or her expectations, then the most important goals in one's life have been met and success has been reached.

Success from a Student Development Perspective

The development of the university student has been a priority for faculty and staff probably since the university was born. However, many of the theories that are now considered guiding principles for student affairs professionals were developed in this century. Some of the more famous of these theories follows, as well as implications they may have in researching student success.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) described the development of the college student in terms of seven different areas, or vectors, in which the average undergraduate should experience growth. The unique characteristic of this model was that no timeline was developed to outline how "normal" development should progress, they only described the nature of this development. These seven vectors, listed in no order of importance, are: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward independence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. To be successful from a student development context, then, would be to grow along these vectors as one proceeds through the postsecondary experience. Important to this model is the realization that higher education is not just meant to build the intellect, but to "develop all the gifts of the human potential." (p. 41) From this perspective, success can be the experience of every student.

Possibly no one has done more to explore the different dimensions of the collegiate experience of students than Astin (1993). His research on what affects students as they go through college has tremendous implications when researching student success because it provides insight to where the elements of the concept originated. With this in mind, some of the characteristics that have a great impact on student development are a student's peer group and his or her values, attitudes, self-concept, and socioeconomic status. Also important in fostering development is the faculty with which a student has contact, with a student-oriented faculty member enhancing development and a research-oriented faculty member actually hindering development. Involvement in the university community in general has many positive effects on cognitive and affective elements, as does academic

involvement, both in and out of class. It seems, then, that success in higher education is

not only a holistic concept, but is also a very integrative concept (Astin, 1993).

Pace (1979) explored the concept of student success and achievement not through

the development of a model, but through information gathered from students using

assessments which allowed student input to determine which students were successful and

what they did to create and ensure that success.   In these studies, he observed that

although students are often tested on their academic achievement, few researchers try to

examine students' value systems, goals or beliefs to determine how students grow on a

more affective level during their college experience. He also recommended that

examinations in the future test critical thinking skills and integrative knowledge rather than

subject-specific facts and figures. Astin (1991) extended this recommendation to suggest

that in performing assessments, researchers should be focusing on students' perceptions of

their college experiences rather than basing research on contrived models.

Possibly as a response to analyzing other standardized surveys such as the College

Level Examination Program (CLEP), Pace (1990) developed his own instrument to assess

student progress, known as the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Part

of this questionnaire asked students to evaluate both their academic and personal progress

in terms of twenty-one goal statements developed by Pace. The study showed that a

majority of the students felt that they were making progress toward a number of goals,

such as "understanding yourself" and "gaining a range of information that may be relevant

to a career" (p. 56).

Historical Perspectives on Success

Success as a construct in higher education, especially in the United States, has changed rather significantly over the past several decades. Students are products of their society, and so as society changes the yardstick by which success is measured will also change. If faculty and student affairs professionals are not sensitive to these changes, then many types of difficulties are likely to develop.

DeVitis and Rich (1996) theorized that there have been four main shifts in the general views of success in America that have greatly impacted the educational system. They have been named the Character Ethic, the Mind Power Ethic, the Personality Ethic, and the Service Ethic.

The Character Ethic was the prevailing philosophy during the first century of American independence. To be successful meant being a hard worker, a moral and upstanding member of your community, and self-sufficient. An example of this kind of thinking can be found in Benjamin Franklin's famous Poor Richard's Almanacs. Merit was based on individual achievements and demanded stamina and farsightedness of goals to persevere to a successful life in a harsh environment (DeVitis and Rich, 1996).

Once cities were established and pioneers had forged their way across the land, the climate of the country began to change. People were very much affected by the rapid changes that industrialization brought to American ways of life, and as a result the standards that defined the Character Ethic, such as religious belief and an agrarian lifestyle, were being exchanged for the excitement of human control. A new view of success emerged and helped especially to shape the first half of the twentieth century. Referred to as the Mind Power Ethic, this view held that success was simply living up to

16

your human potential, which, in the era of the discovery of flight, electricity, and mass communication, was limited only by the boundaries of one's imagination. Books like Norman Vincent Peale's The Power of Positive Thinking and Napoleon Hill's Think and Grow Rich spoke of the great resources that could be tapped if people only acted on their thoughts (DeVitis and Rich, 1996).

Also growing in popularity over the course of the twentieth century was the varied and easily accessible world of the media. Hollywood movies and newsreels told stories of glamour and fame and the growing circulation of magazines and newspapers many times only served to affirm this image of success and happiness. Called the Personality Ethic, it held that if others perceived you as successful that should be enough to prove success to yourself. Championed by industrial giants such as Dale Carnegie, and used successfully by Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, this method of achieving success used techniques of persuasion and image building. These techniques often created illusions of confidence and comfort for people to ensure a secure position in authority (DeVitis and Rich, 1996).

Finally, as the century progressed, a less self-centered view of success emerged and was exemplified by people such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Pope John Paul II. To them, image was only valid if grounded in action, and human potential was reached only if those thought of success reached beyond the self. Called the Service Ethic, it measured success by the positive impact you had to improve the local or global community. The more people you helped achieve success, the more successful you were on a personal level (DeVitis and Rich, 1996).

No matter how much research is done in an area, however, no one can generalize the quality or condition of human behavior or success across all situations because of the

complexity of both our lives and our environments. Therefore, when developing any kind of intervention that would seek to improve the quality of that condition, namely by improving the likelihood of success, it seems logical that one would try to determine how success is viewed at that particular institution. Once there is a common definition or view of success, and in this case specifically, student success, then the interventions can be developed which meet the needs of all students much more accurately, and much more effectively.

Factors of Successful and Non-Successful Students

In many cases, research has been based on the assumption that success as a student simply means success in the academic arena. Operating under these assumed conditions of success, several researchers have worked to develop models that describe the general attributes of a successful student versus a non-successful student. Many applications of this research have been used to assist student affairs professionals working with college and university admissions. A sample of these types of profiles follows.

Larose and Roy (1991) used a Likert-type test to analyze accurate predictors of success especially for students in their first semester of college. This test was specifically designed to survey qualitative characteristics such as personal beliefs, study habits, and perceived levels of stress. Once the test was completed by each student, it was scored and personal attributes were compared to the student's high school grade point average (GPA) to determine which was more closely correlated to the success a student had achieved. In this way, the researchers could use these correlations to determine factors that would predict success in future students. For at-risk students the personal attributes test was a much more accurate predictor of student success, whereas for the total population, the

high school grade point average more closely correlated with the level of success achieved. Their research showed clearly that, when analyzing success, one must consider the implication that different groups may achieve success in different ways. Unless we can find a way to develop a comprehensive view of success and how it is achieved, there will always be groups who find themselves "at-risk" because they don't conform to the general goal and perspective.

Further research shows that personal attributes can indeed classify students as successful or non-successful without previously knowing their grade point average. A questionnaire was administered to a group of female single parents in college to determine their opinions of the causes and barriers to success. From this questionnaire, Boutsen and Colbry (1991) were able to accurately classify all but one student as successful or unsuccessful in terms of a grade point average and in terms of various contributory attributes such as study habits that were internally or externally controlled.

The development of students' self-esteem also has a significant impact on their performance in many other personal areas. Higbee and Dwinell (1996) used two different inventory-type tests to determine these effects of a high self-esteem on students. Findings from this study indicated that a healthy and well-balanced lifestyle, an ability to adequately deal with different kinds of relationships with maturity, and an ability to manage and effectively prioritize one's many different responsibilities and activities both stemmed from a high self-esteem and further promoted that high self-esteem. It follows, then, that if students are capable of adequately handling their personal lives, they are likely to have more success with their academic life.

Research has also been done in an attempt to determine the factors that could contribute to attrition during the first year. Fralick (1993) surveyed community college students who had left within their first year, and made some very interesting discoveries. The first finding was that, at least at the community college level, attrition is not necessarily a negative consequence if students felt that the experience was beneficial and helped them progress toward their personal goals. With these personal goals in mind, over three-quarters of those surveyed left due to "positive attrition" factors, such as employment. Another very interesting finding was that gender and ethnicity had no significant effect on students' decisions to remain at the institution. What did have an effect on students was the personal attachment they felt to the college, especially through teachers and advisors, the certainty of their academic or career goals, and the general satisfaction they felt with their college experience.

These different views of being successful also have implications for classroom behavior. As Schonwetter, Perry, and Struthers (1993) found, several factors combine to determine student success in an individual course. Three of these characteristics that could have the most far-reaching consequences are a student's perception of control, a student's perception of success, and the expressiveness of the instructor in the classroom. For example, students may see themselves as successful but don't believe that they exert much control over that success. For them, the type of instruction they receive can have a much more significant impact on their performance than if there was a higher perception of control over the situation. Observations like these should remind everyone involved in education that not all students believe that success is under personal control and classroom

dynamics may be more a result of personal attributes than of actual knowledge and understanding.

Another important research finding concerned how students perceived the achievement of success in the classroom and the effects that had on their classroom efforts. Livengood (1992) used a questionnaire to determine students' definitions of success in the classroom and then used this definition to analyze their classroom behavior. As it turned out, those who defined success in terms of final course grades were very "performance-based" in the classroom and would sacrifice learning potential to ensure a favorable image and, as was expected, the highest grade. Those who defined success as an overall learning process, on the other hand, would be much more likely to sacrifice a good grade by choosing a more demanding professor or a more challenging assignment. It appears from this study that student success is not necessarily defined in a strictly statistical manner, but covers a much broader array of behaviors than can usually be determined from quantitative data such as course grades.

In an application of this type of research, Rea (1991) surveyed students enrolled in psychology courses to determine how they were motivated to perform in their classes as a way to help faculty better orient their teaching style to have the greatest impact on students. The researcher found that these students were intrinsically motivated and preferred knowing they had put forth the best effort rather than receiving the best grade. Knowing how students are driven in any class or group situation can have a great impact on performance if teachers are able to accommodate students in their teaching methods.

For another study meant to improve faculty performance by more closely aligning style to student need, Lomo-David and Hulbert (1993) arrived at some very interesting

results. After surveying a large number of students in colleges of business, they found that students had similar opinions on what constituted effective faculty teaching methods in the classroom. The interesting finding was that these results were similar both across majors and across institutions. If a consensus can be reached in this way on faculty performance, then perhaps a consensus can be reached definitively concerning the nature of student success at an institution.

Even more than predicting students' performance in an individual class, a measure of attitudes has been used as a fairly reliable predictor for grade point average across semesters. House (1993) surveyed a group of students who were beginning their freshman year at the university on their expectations for achievement at college and then tracked their performance after two, four, and eight semesters. He found that, after using both correlation and multiple regression analysis, the same five achievement expectancies were indeed predictive of grade point average across the college experience. These five expectancies were: failing one or more courses in college, graduating with honors, making at least a B average in college, needing tutoring assistance, and earning a bachelor's degree. Through this study, then, it is evident that students who believe in success can achieve it, provided students are allowed ownership over that expectation of success.

Using Student Success Principles in Programming

Some researchers have used student success as a measure of the success or failure of a particular program or intervention that is focused on students who are at risk of failure. Again, without an understanding of success by all groups involved, including students, the intervention may be prematurely or wrongly judged. Examples of this type of research follow.

Abrams and Jernigan (1984) reported that interventions at Eastern Michigan University had a very definite impact on entering students who were considered "high-risk". In fact, the researchers concluded that most of the traditional admissions criteria were not reliable predictors of student success at all. Instead, students' willingness to participate in available assistance programs turned out to be the most reliable predictor of success in college, and had definite implications for determining admissions criteria, at least for "high-risk" students.

In addition, Friedlander and MacDougall (1993) used the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire to determine the effect of college services on student achievement. They found that not only was the amount of student use of services related to their overall achievement in school, but that this overall level of student involvement was actually preferable to traditional predictors. Using this information, the researchers recommended various methods that college and university personnel could use to help improve student success through student services.

Grevatt (1992) and the staff at the Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology used the goal of achieving student success to create a comprehensive policy initiative that included installing an automated information system, a holistic approach to student interventions, and evaluation strategies for continually improving their programming. With this system, the researcher determined that student retention indeed increased from previous years, which met the original institutional goals and provided the springboard for further growth and development.

Finally, administrators at Virginia Tech have voiced their own concerns for developing conditions that foster student success through the creation of the Committee

23

for Student Success and through pilot projects such as The Wing, a freshman year experience program. In this case, administrators did formulate a definition, albeit complicated, for student success:

To elevate the culture of learning, the university will focus on student success--the achievement of a comprehensive set of student educational outcomes:

1.　　　Meeting one's own hopes and dreams

- Meet career goals

- Obtain a degree

- Secure meaningful employment or a position in a graduate or professional school

2.　　　Becoming a life-long learner

- Think critically

- Increase intellectual curiosity

- Learn how to learn

- Communicate effectively

- Solve problems effectively

- Understand scientific inquiry

- Be technologically proficient

- Develop a sense of history, literature, economics, social structures, and the workings of the human mind

- Appreciate and participate in the arts

3.　　　Becoming a professional

- Gain knowledge and learn skills

- Be responsible and ethical

- Develop a commitment to community service

- Learn to interact constructively with others

4. Becoming a citizen of the world

- Develop one's leadership skills

- Work effectively in a diverse environment

- Work effectively as part of a team

- Learn to adapt in an environment of change." (Ridenour,

  1997, p. 1-2)

Differing Perceptions of Faculty and Students

In approaching the subject of student success, it is evident from the above research

that there is a lack of consistency in how success in the postsecondary experience is

achieved and evaluated. Given this, it is not surprising that there could also be a lack of

congruence found between the perceptions of faculty or student affairs professionals and

students regarding the nature and facilitation of student success. Although the research

examples that follow do not specifically address student success, they do illustrate this

possibility for incongruity very clearly.

Blackhurst and Pearson (1996) uncovered these differences by conducting an

evaluation of a freshman seminar class using faculty, student affairs staff, and student

input. The faculty emphasized cognitive development while staff emphasized affective

development. Because of those differences, those surveyed felt that the course should be

team taught to provide the most overall benefits. When students were surveyed, however,

they supported the opposite opinion. From their viewpoint, they felt that student affairs professionals adequately emphasized both cognitive and affective development. Furthermore, they felt that a course taught singly by the student affairs professional would be much more beneficial than a team-taught course. If these perceptions were held among the general student population, it would be interesting to see how these perceptions would impact performance in a classroom or program that either did not match their views of a good classroom environment or did match their views of a poor classroom environment.

Schroeder (1993) took a more psychological view of how faculty and students differed by analyzing their preferences in the classroom, with some very interesting findings. Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test, he screened various faculty and new college students to determine how they prefer to learn and perceive the world. A majority of the students preferred the sensing mode of perception and also preferred an active form of learning using concrete examples. Of the faculty that were surveyed, however, over 75% preferred the intuitive mode of perception and only 10% preferred using the active form of learning with concrete examples, preferring instead a reflective form of learning using abstract examples. If ways of learning and perceiving are truly different for faculty and students, then perhaps their perceptions of student success and its achievement are also different.

Although perceptions of faculty and students may be different in certain situations, it seems that, for faculty at least, the type of postsecondary institution may have an effect on general perceptions of the student population and expectations for behaviors that constitute student success. Brozo and Schmelzer (1985) found that faculty from teaching-oriented institutions valued productive behaviors within the context of the actual courses,

including work inside and outside of the classroom related to such courses. Faculty from research-oriented institutions, on the other hand, were more concerned with work outside of a student's courses, seeing that work as more valuable in judging overall success and achievement. If faculty's perceptions do in fact differ based on institution type, then the importance of each institution for determining an agreed-upon philosophy on which to base the facilitation of student success becomes all the more crucial.

Using Focus Groups in Research

Many different avenues can be taken to examine student success. Examples of these research methods include the survey or questionnaire, the phone interview, or the personal one-on-one interview. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the form of the focus group was used as a means of collecting qualitative data. This decision was made for many reasons.

Focus groups, which rely on an established set of questions for every group, were first developed as an alternative to traditional interviewing (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups were originally used for psychological purposes such as increasing military morale during World War II. However, over the past thirty years or so, the most popular use for the focus groups has been in marketing research in order to determine the best ways to advertise a product or service based on group perceptions. Educational professionals have used a similar approach in designing, evaluating, and advertising their products and services. Krueger described the purpose of focus groups in this manner:

> Strategic planning, needs assessment, and program evaluation are critical activities for human service professionals who want to improve programs and services. Focus groups can provide them information about

perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of program clients. The procedure allows professionals to see reality from the client's point of view (p. 9).

Several qualifications must be met before a group discussion can be considered a focus group. First, focus groups are held with only a small group of people, usually no more than twelve, to ensure that everyone's opinions are voiced but that no one feels a need to divide into factions during the course of the session. Second, a number of focus groups are held concerning a certain subject in an attempt to establish trends and general opinions as well as to ensure that an unresponsive group does not jeopardize the study. Third, participants must be similar enough to each other to feel comfortable sharing information with the group, but unfamiliar enough to ensure that knowledge of opinions is not assumed within the group but is shared. Fourth, focus groups are used to collect information, usually for research purposes, and specifically are used to collect qualitative data. Finally, focus groups, as the name implies, usually concern a specific topic and require a subtle but very structured direction provided by the interviewer. Although questions asked are usually very simple and may appear to stem directly from a particular discussion, in fact most questions are developed before the session begins and the flow and content of the discussion is controlled and guided from start to finish by the facilitator (Krueger, 1994).

Using this methodology, many institutions have been able to acquire needed qualitative, and candid, information that has helped to effect positive changes or to determine the scope and rationale behind certain situations. As Nicklin (1996) commented, "Colleges want to be what their constituents want them to be, and focus groups are a fairly inexpensive way of accomplishing that" (p. A25). Russell (1991) added

that focus groups can also provide a way to obtain group information on a particular topic in a much shorter amount of time if necessary. Also, because of the relative freedom that focus groups provide, Bers and Smith (1988) suggested that focus groups be employed when the theoretical base for a subject does not provide the researcher with sufficient information to conduct a quantitative study. Finally, Kaase and Harshbarger (1993) reminded us that focus groups in effect serve a dual purpose. First, they provide a means for an institution to acquire useful information about a particular area of interest. Second, however, they also provide a means to show that the institution (in this case, the university) has a genuine interest in the constituent (in this case, the student), his or her opinions, and how those opinions can impact and improve standards and policies. This demonstration of caring, then, can have an effect on satisfaction and retention long after the focus groups have been completed.

Researchers have suggested that quantitative data also be collected when using the focus group method in order to corroborate the results of the qualitative data gathered. A common way of doing this is to provide a follow-up survey or questionnaire either to the focus group participants only or to a wider population based on questions or feedback from the group sessions (Nicklin, 1996). An example of this was Wheeler's (1996) study of the service and support provided to persons with disabilities and their families. After the focus groups were conducted, a follow-up survey was provided for all participants with a 94% response rate and showed that any group influence on individual's spoken responses was minimal. This helped the researcher establish more grounded policy recommendations.

In fact, Virginia Tech used focus groups in order to determine the Core Values that now provide a foundation and direction for current and future University policies. Focus groups were conducted with several University groups, including administration, alumni, faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and parents. Although each of these groups was inherently different, the open atmosphere of the group allowed researchers to see that all Virginia Tech-affiliated groups did hold certain values in common, which were then adopted by the University as a whole based on these participants (Muffo, 1996).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purposes

This study was designed for three purposes. First, the researcher sought to define student success based on the perspectives of student and faculty populations within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Second, the researcher sought to identify the barriers to student success. Finally, the researcher sought to identify strategies that would foster student success.

Research Questions

With these purposes in mind, focus groups were conducted with students from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech during the spring semester of 1997. That data was compared with data from faculty focus groups conducted in the spring 1998 semester in an attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

- How do students at different academic levels and faculty members define student success?

- What barriers do faculty and students at different academic levels see that are encountered in trying to achieve student success?

- What do faculty and students at different academic levels feel is needed to help improve the chances of student success?

- How do the perspectives of student success compare and contrast between faculty and students at different academic levels?

Population and Sample

The population for this study was limited to the student and faculty populations of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech, which at the time the

31

research was conducted consisted of 1497 students (Massie, 1998) and 193 faculty. No restrictions to students, such as class standing, gender, or race, were applied to further limit the population from which the sample was drawn. The only restriction made in the faculty population was that their main teaching assignment be at the Blacksburg Campus to increase the likelihood of participation if they were selected.

Participant lists for both sets of groups were received through Mr. Paul Brozovsky in the Office of Institutional Research and Planning Analysis. A computer program was used to randomize all lists to eliminate any research bias in selecting samples. In addition, only essential information needed to organize the groups was included to minimize any invasion of privacy. The overall target sample for the student population was 80 students and the target sample for the faculty population was 20 people. The overall sample, therefore, was planned to comprise 100 people. This was to be accomplished with eight student focus groups, two groups representing each academic class level, and two faculty focus groups.

Once the population lists were acquired, the process for acquiring participants was similar for both groups. Phone numbers were gathered for each name, and then each person was invited to participate by phone in the order they were listed (See Appendix 1). For convenience to both faculty members and the researcher, e-mail addresses were also found with each potential faculty participant, and they were contacted through e-mail (See Appendix 2). Solicitation continued until 10 students or faculty members for each group had agreed to participate. Reminders were also given prior to the focus group session to those that had made plans to attend.

Human Subjects Clearance

In accordance with University policy (Research Division, 1993), an application to conduct research involving human subjects was submitted prior to collecting all research data. A copy of the approved application is included in Appendix 6 of this thesis.

Data Collection

The data collection for this thesis was completed in two separate phases. Student focus groups were conducted in the Spring semester of 1997; faculty focus groups were conducted the following Spring semester in 1998. This delay in data collection was caused by a cessation in funding after the student groups were completed. The protocol of the focus groups (See Appendix 5) as described below was used for both sets of participants in order to maintain consistency in data collection. In addition to the facilitator who performed the group interviews, a co-facilitator was assigned. This person provided verification to the transcriptions, acted as an observer of each group, and assisted the facilitator in collecting the paperwork and monitoring the tape recorder.

Background surveys were also administered during each focus group and were also designed to be similar (See Appendices 3 and 4). These were meant to acquire general information about the participants' overall background and experiences at Virginia Tech as a way to supplement the focus group interviews. However, each set of surveys was tailored to reflect the differences of orientation between students and faculty. No surveys were analyzed until after the focus group had ended to prevent bias on the part of the facilitators. None of the questions asked on the survey should have directly impacted any participants' responses during the remainder of the group.

Each focus group session was conducted using the following format: a) the focus group facilitator was introduced, b) the participants were told the main purpose of the groups, c) the participants were made aware that the sessions would be audio-recorded, and d) the participants were asked to sign consent forms to verify willing participation. Once the tape recorder started, the focus group began with a discussion by the participants of the definition of student success, including the origins of those definitions as well as the various components that contributed to the overall concept. Once a general consensus was established among the group, the participants were asked to take a few minutes to consider the possible barriers to achieving students success, given their definition. Their ideas were written on index cards instead of being openly discussed with the group. These cards were then collected into one pile, and the participants were asked to silently group the cards into categories so as to minimize the influence of any one participant in particular. The participants then completed the questionnaire supplied by the facilitator.

The second half of the focus group consisted of a discussion of each of the categories that were created by the participants. It focused not only on barriers that they or others had experienced, but also on how these barriers could be (or had been) overcome to more closely approach the goal of student success. Other possible barriers to student success were also discussed, as well as other approaches that could be taken to foster student success within the college. The focus groups, then, generally ended in a positive, empowered atmosphere that intended to spark some individual action within the participants' own environments. This method of conducting focus groups is based on the method developed by Scott (1995) and employed in her dissertation research.

A brief explanation and acknowledgement is appropriate. This project was developed in late 1996 in response to a call for proposals by the University's Committee for Student Success. The original proposal consisted of three phases, one of which was conducting focus groups with students from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. This proposal was awarded a grant for the 1996-1997 year, which was not received until December 1996. The author was hired, then, to serve as the project manager for the series of focus groups which was conducted over the Spring semester in 1997 under the supervision of Dr. William Camp. In this position the author coordinated various aspects of the project as well as served as a co-facilitator for each of the focus groups. The majority of the original design and implementation of these groups should be credited, however, to Mohammad Yaim Naakub who served as facilitator of these student groups. Because the Student Success project was not refunded for the 1997-1998 term, analysis had not yet been performed on the data that we had collected. This thesis, then, was developed as an extension of this Student Success project with faculty focus groups added to provide data for comparison.

Data Analysis

Each focus group was audiotaped, with full consent of all participants. In addition, a co-facilitator was available to record observations of the focus group to provide further information on the session. Each tape was transcribed professionally to a electronic format.

This data was analyzed by hand. The transcriptions were first coded for information that was considered by the author to be pertinent. In order to provide the most complete answers to the research questions, information was separated into three

different sections. These categories were: definitions of student success, barriers to

success, and solutions to improve the chances of success. The student focus groups were

separated by class level to determine first whether perspectives within each academic level

were similar and second to determine if views of student success changed with age or time

spent at a university. The faculty groups were considered separately. Once similarities

had been determined for each class and for the faculty, student views were compared with

faculty views to determine overall similarities. The demographic surveys were also

analyzed to provide insight into the makeup of the groups and how their backgrounds

might have impacted their opinions about student success. Finally, the various barriers

which participants had described on index cards were gleaned from the transcriptions and

sorted by the researcher to discover overall themes. The individual barriers are listed by

theme in Appendix 6, and these themes are discussed in Chapter 5. Due to the nature of

this study, all information collected and analyzed was qualitative in nature.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Purposes

This study was designed for three purposes. First, the researcher sought to define student success based on the perspectives of student and faculty populations within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Second, the researcher sought to identify the barriers to student success. Finally, the researcher sought to identify strategies that would foster student success.

Research Questions

With these purposes in mind, focus groups were conducted first with students from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech during the spring semester of 1997. That data was compared with data from faculty focus groups conducted in the spring 1998 semester in an attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

- How do students at different academic levels and faculty members define student success?

- What barriers do faculty and students at different academic levels see that are encountered in trying to achieve student success?

- What do faculty and students at different academic levels feel is needed to help improve the chances of student success?

- How do the perspectives of student success compare and contrast between faculty and students at different academic levels?

Overview of Focus Groups

The greatest problem that was encountered during the course of this study was in securing an adequate number of participants for each focus group. In most cases, the actual rate of participation was approximately 30% of what had been originally expected. Even so, those who did participate were open about their experiences and provided the researchers with a great deal of valuable information. The findings reported below are based on two focus groups with faculty (7 participants total) and eight focus groups with students (27 participants total).

Analysis of Focus Groups: Faculty

Definitions of Student Success

"…what is student success…?"

"To get good enough grades, to graduate from Virginia Tech, and to get a career in their area of choice."

The above quote seems to sum up the perspective of the faculty that participated in the two focus groups that were conducted in the Spring of 1998. This sentiment was also expressed in terms of students "reaching [their] potential", "maximizing [their] goals and achievements", and "matching [their] ideas and abilities". When the academic aspect of success was addressed, faculty expressed their concern that students "successfully [complete] courses [and carry] something away from the courses that they can use." In addition to academic pursuits, though, the faculty that were interviewed felt that leadership experiences, community involvement, and teamwork activities were important to a successful college experience.

As an illustration to help define the complexity of student success, one faculty member brought up the importance of self-esteem in measuring success in descriptions of three students. The faculty member making the illustration chose the gender of his examples. The first student had a high QCA, accepted an assistantship in a field in which she was very interested, and so deservedly had a high sense of self-esteem. The second person had completed over half of her college program before she found an area in which she was really interested, so even though her QCA was only mediocre, she had just as high a sense of self-esteem, and so had also experienced success. The third student also had a high QCA but had no real goals for herself, so because she doesn't know what to do after college she doesn't feel good about herself and so really isn't successful. This illustration was quite insightful and provided quite a holistic view of what is means for a student to be successful.

Barriers to Student Success

The faculty who participated in the focus groups had, for the most part, a similar idea of the kind of barriers that students might experience. Some, however, seemed to be more interested in academic barriers while others seemed to be more focused on barriers external to the classroom. Even so, they saw most barriers as being personal to each student, rather than barriers that were put before students from an external source such as the institution.

Two barriers were identified repeatedly during the faculty focus groups. These were a lack of motivation or lack of ambition and a lack of maturity. Participants agreed that there was a certain amount of time needed to "[learn] how to survive in college" that prevented some students from succeeding in the beginning of their college experience. In

39

addition, one faculty member commented that students may "not [realize] the effort required to succeed in college" because they were so successful in high school without a great deal of effort. Finally, faculty members commented that students needed "clear goals and expectations" for their college experience and for their careers. They observed that these students were much more likely to be successful and dedicated to their education than students who were "in this major because their parents or Dr. so-and-so said you need to major in this."

Another barrier that was mentioned as a rather serious problem was a lack of time management. When asked about the possibility of learning time management skills through workshops rather than through trial and error, one faculty member commented, "I'm sure they can learn the skills of time management, but putting it into practice, I think that's the part that's throwing the curve." In addition, faculty mentioned the many different pressures on students to perform both in and out of the classroom that could potentially make achieving success a very stressful experience. One faculty member even commented, "I don't know how they find the time to succeed academically with all of the other things they are doing." Some of the faculty felt that they as faculty were partially at fault because they were also overly committed with obligations and so were bad role models to their students.

Lastly, faculty noticed that many more students were working than had been in previous years, which also contributed to time management pressures. This increased need to work was also a symptom of increased financial pressures. Faculty commented on students who worked full-time in order to pay for their schooling because they either didn't want the burden of loans or because they didn't qualify for financial grants as

dependents of their parents. One faculty member made an interesting observation that "there is a significant proportion [of students] where the parents could contribute more and they don't for one reason or another and this puts more pressure on the students." On the other hand, some faculty members commented on the increased maturity and motivation of students who were employed while in school as a benefit to this additional time commitment.

None of the faculty members, however, were sympathetic to students' spending time engaged in social activities, and all saw participation in too many social activities as a barrier to student success. Faculty did understand the pressures exerted by peers as an obstacle, however, and one participant commented, "I can see how easy it is…if the gang's going, I want to be part of the gang." On the other hand, another faculty member seemed to be weary of the complaints to dismiss 8:00 AM classes: "They're not going to change the night end when things end and start, but they don't like having to start at 8:00." Additionally, one faculty member pointed out the lack of maturity that was evident in students who made poor judgements and chose social activities over academics.

In addressing academics, though, participants addressed the poor study skills that they observed in many students. A faculty member in the first group suggested that students arrive at college with different levels of study skills, and the weaker students seem to continue in their poor habits throughout their college career. In addition, one participant provided the insight that many students "equate work with study, so they think because they're putting in a lot of hours that they're studying hard, but because they haven't developed good study habits, they don't study effectively." Faculty members also

41

observed that students often based the level of work they put into a class on how well they liked it, and as a result performed poorly in required or core curriculum courses.

Faculty also commented on the fact that students, in general, had too little contact with faculty outside of the classroom. Participants did offer several reasons why this might be the case, however. They said that in many circumstances students might feel intimidated by faculty members because of the authority figures they represent, and so may seem unapproachable. One participant shared that, "I always joke with students: I'll have office hours and I'll put a nametag on." Those interviewed also felt that students might not be able to relate well to faculty members either in terms of interests, learning styles, or communication styles. Even though faculty agreed that this lack of contact could present problems especially when students are making plans for their careers outside of college, one participant admitted that it's "probably very, very difficult in the first couple of years to get a high level of involvement [with faculty]."

A final barrier that emerged was external pressures and the inability of students to handle them. These pressures could be with family, friends, or with finances. One faculty member showed excellent insight in making the comment: "I have a feeling that [those pressures] are much more important than we realize…because you don't know what the students are bringing, what they're subjected to at home…." Another participant mentioned the pressures put on students to work because their parents "could contribute more and they don't for one reason or another." Although these comments were not meant to provide excuses for students' behaviors, they did demonstrate how external issues could steer students' focus away from achieving academic success.

Solutions to Improve the Chances of Student Success

The faculty members were glad to offer suggestions of techniques or interventions that could be employed to increase the chances of a student's success, but comments were made in both focus groups to temper those suggestions with caution. For example, after mentioning a specific technique that was being used to increase participation in a class, one faculty member added, "I have a real problem with how much of it is really my responsibility and how much of it has to be their own personal responsibility." Another participant in the other focus group was much more insistent about students' responsibilities: "I think there's some things we can do to try to make things better, but it all comes down to the individual's responsibility, and they must understand that if they're going to succeed, they're the ones doing the work."

Most of the suggestions that the faculty offered dealt with methods that could be employed either in the classroom or as an extension to orientation for new students. The use of unannounced quizzes to improve attendance rates was mentioned more than once and several participants commented on the need to improve student participation in class. One faculty member suggested that this be done by ensuring that students have assignments due every week so they won't get behind while another participant was more concerned about improving the group and public speaking assignments offered in courses.

Concerning the extension of orientation, one faculty member suggested that a one-credit mandatory introductory course would be an efficient way of ensuring that students are equipped with all necessary information concerning university resources and academic survival skills. Another simply stressed the need to follow-up with students during their first semester at the university. One participant wondered, "how much are you really

43

paying attention to these nitpicky details they're throwing at you in June and July when you…don't know how that relates…or…applies?" In addition, faculty felt very strongly that information on university resources should be brought to the student to ensure the student has the proper information before difficulties are encountered.

Outside of the classroom, the faculty felt that there was room for increased student involvement, but differed on the methods. Some saw the need for increased opportunities for undergraduate research and more intensive advising, while others looked outside the university to comment on the need for better job opportunities and greater involvement in student organizations. Participants also mentioned an interest in developing a college-wide picnic to provide a comfortable social atmosphere where new students could get acquainted with both faculty and other students.

Analysis of Focus Groups: Freshmen

Definitions of Student Success

The definitions that were offered by the students of these focus groups were straightforward, although some seemed to have a broader perspective on their concepts of student success. Specifically, certain participants described the elements of student success as maintaining good grades, gaining experience and practical knowledge in one's field and acquiring business contacts, and achieving one's goals. One student in this group simply said that student success represented "the ability of the student to get what they want out of the university education." Others described student success in terms of being dedicated to your education, achieving a healthy balance in your life, and being a well-rounded person. One student commented about students' personal control over their success: "What you put in it is what you get out of it."

Barriers to Student Success

The barriers to student success that were discussed in these two focus groups were had many similarities. Both groups were focused mainly on academic barriers to success and expressed the frustrations involved in adapting to the university environment. For example, one student in the first group commented, "…it's a big adjustment…coming into college and getting 'Cs' when you got 'As' in high school…." In addition, students gave the impression that they felt the responsibility for student success should be held equally by the students themselves and by university personnel.

One barrier that was mentioned frequently was lack of familiarity with the Virginia Tech environment. Students felt strongly that knowing was half the battle when it came to success at the university. Several students commented that they simply weren't prepared in high school to expect the kind of experiences and challenges that they were currently facing in college. Participants were confident that if they had been made aware of what awaited them at the university that they would have been able to arrive better prepared to face those challenges. One student felt instead that not knowing people, both students and faculty, around the university was a barrier because it was difficult to participate fully in classes and because students lacked a resource for information and advice. They admitted, however, that this was a difficulty mainly for students who were new to the university.

Several barriers dealt with the academic environment and faculty performance. All students mentioned a dislike for large classes and the isolation they felt when a single class had a larger attendance then their entire graduating class. One student commented, "I'm used to maybe 20 people in a class and now I've got 200 people in a class and it's--you don't know your professor, you don't know the person you're sitting beside and you can sit

beside a new person every day for the entire semester…." Participants also found it difficult to work with some of their professors for various reasons. For example, most students had trouble understanding professors in class due to both accents and communication styles. One student made the observation: "I think they are all so well-[versed] on the subject sometimes they forget that whoever they are teaching to has never been exposed to the subject." In addition, some participants had been misinformed about their schedules and had trouble working within faculty office hour schedules.

The freshmen also reflected on the barriers that lacking self-discipline or ambition presents to achieving success in one's college career. Participants commented that simply being unsure of your major or of a future career direction could have severe implications in terms of motivation, involvement, and the amount of time it takes to complete one's degree. One student also mentioned that unless a student has learned to practice self-discipline in high school it is extremely difficult to learn it while experiencing the freedoms that college allows: "I mean, you don't have your parents over there leaning over your shoulder telling you to study." Students agreed, though, that developing ambition and discipline were a personal responsibility, and a few seemed to think that the student's family environment and beliefs played a central role in shaping these traits.

Solutions to Improve the Chances of Student Success

Most of the solutions that were suggested by the participants dealt with techniques that would improve the academic environment and would improve communication on the campus. Again, most of these suggestions were based on the participants' initial experiences in a university environment, some of which were very recent.

Specifically, participants suggested that professors review testing and grading procedures before, rather than after, the first test to help alleviate test anxiety and ineffective study methods. One participant also made the suggestion that introductory classes should be separated by similar majors, such as a biology course specifically for agriculture students. All participants agreed that students should be warned earlier and provided more information when academic eligibility is in jeopardy. For example, one student asked that a resource guide of support interventions be included with the warning letter sent out to students: "I got a letter…that said, you know, basically shape up and, you know, it was nice…but that's all I got. I mean, I didn't get any sheets that said where I could go for help or who I could get tutoring from." A second student felt that the advisor should take responsibility for contacting students who are on probation to increase student accountability.

Students also had several suggestions to assist students before and when they first come to the university. For example, one student felt it would be beneficial to send university students back to discuss their experiences with high school students considering college. Another felt that upperclass university students should be available for freshman students for information and referrals: "I think that a lot of times the student may know where they want to go, but they just don't know how to get there." Finally, a suggestion was made to hold something similar to a majors fair where students, especially those still undecided, would be able to explore different majors and talk to different professors and students in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. In all cases, though, the central theme to the solutions that were given was to improve the communication within the college and within the university community.

Analysis of Focus Groups: Sophomores

Definitions of Student Success

Some of the sophomore participants had very high expectations for a student to be considered successful, and others again had a more vague, personal concept of student success. In general, student success among this group of students consisted of maintaining good grades, being involved in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and being able to use the college experience in meeting future career or personal goals. One student commented that success "if you put it on a grade scale it's anything way above average--probably like 3.0 or above". Another student commented that "you just push yourself as hard as you can for your success." This same student described involvement in extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports as very important. On the other hand, a student offered the perspective that "you can be successful when you've done everything you came here to do," implying that grades and success are not synonymous.

Barriers to Student Success

Although somewhat similar, some students were more specific in the circumstances that presented barriers. Others, in contrast, were much broader and for the most part named barriers that impacted on the entire college experience.

One barrier that was mentioned was a lack of study skills necessary to accomplish college-level work. Not only did students have difficulty in studying effectively, but they had difficulty managing their time, balancing their social activities with their academics, and simply understanding the amount of work it took to perform well in their classes. Some participants mentioned that they really hadn't taken their high school studies

seriously so it was very difficult because they weren't prepared for the rigors of their college classes. In addition, students mentioned that the inability to control the urge to procrastinate had created many problems and had been a barrier to success.

One barrier that several referred to throughout the discussion was that of financial pressures. One student saw finances as a barrier that prevented attendance at some of the more exclusive schools and forced attendance at the less expensive state university. Another student felt that it was impossible to maintain employment that met monthly expenses and also maintain excellence in academics. Along the same lines, a somewhat bitter-sounding comment was made that financial aid didn't seem to be based on academic performance in high school, which made extra efforts seem in vain. Finally, one student mentioned the constant stress that finances brought, whether from the knowledge that family is sacrificing to pay expenses, that loans are accumulating, or that a college education is entirely the student's responsibility.

A final set of barriers dealt with the classroom environment. Several saw the impersonal teaching styles of some professors and the lack of faculty contact with students as a barrier to learning. The measure of a good professor, it seemed, was a simple willingness to be accessible and help students outside of the classroom. Some students commented instead that the lack of practical opportunities in some of their classes was a hindrance to their future performance in their chosen career fields. One student admitted that there was a continual sense of worry about the competition in the veterinary career field and commented, "If you haven't had the opportunities that other people have, then you feel like they are one step ahead of you."

Solutions to Improve the Chances of Student Success

Again, many of the solutions that were offered by the participants dealt with improving communication in the university. One student made this comment on teaching style: "I like professors who, you know, use real-life experiences or stories to tell, to teach you, and then tie it all together with slides. Almost like a--just a presentation in general instead of just copying notes and studying your notes and memorizing." Students also suggested that professors use background information only to provide structure rather than more testable material. Another suggestion was made that alumni who came back to the university to share stories and advice might impact students who need to improve.

One student commented that the practice that students receive information on support services only after they begin having problems needed to change. A student in the second group was very frustrated that the main information resource was becoming the computer: "you know there are resources, but the best thing is having someone to talk to." Both groups made the general comment, however, that they felt that they had more personal contact and better individualized treatment than other colleges on campus and were very sensitive to that fact.

<div align="center">

Analysis of Focus Groups: Juniors

</div>

Definitions of Student Success

The participants in these two groups saw a student's attitude as the greatest predictor of his or her success. One student made the observation: "From what I've seen, people who are struggling or are having trouble succeeding in their objectives, they tend to get down on themselves or are really struggling and they are very stressed. Those people who are getting accomplished what they set out to do don't have as much stress,

<div align="center">

50

</div>

they are in a good mood, they are smiling, there's just a glow about them." Another student commented that students succeed when they're doing what they want to do and they're happy in their major.

Students did mention the traditional markers of success such as graduation, grades, and extracurricular involvement as being indicators of being successful. However, all agreed that the measures of success depend on each individual person. One student commented: "From my point of view, you have to look at the person as a whole because I know people who, if you were to put them into a classroom they might not do so well, but when you put them in a practical situation, they can handle their own." Another student observed, though, that students who are successful "strive to do the best they can." Other students agreed that being motivated and hard working were sure indicators of a person working toward success.

Barriers to Student Success

Unlike other academic levels, students in these two groups named many different barriers and were not very similar as a group. Among barriers that were not shared, some students were much more specific on the particular circumstances they felt hindered their success, while others were much broader in describing their barriers. In addition, some participants concentrated much more on barriers that were imposed upon them by conditions within the university. Other students chose instead to focus on barriers that were much more personal in nature and were only indirectly affected by the university environment.

The first barrier that was common to all participants was the personal problems that affected college performance. These kinds of problems were described in terms of

family conflicts, financial stresses, and personal stresses caused by such factors as low self-esteem. Participants also mentioned a lack of mission as a barrier to success in college. One student made the comment, "Not to be stereotypical or anything but I guess you can put those people who haven't declared a major by their Junior year in that--they are just here going to class…but [they don't] have any internal drive or determination to succeed or to get anything done." Related to that comment, another student observed, "If you don't have any self-esteem or self-confidence, you don't have any drive or vision or whatever." This barrier seemed to relate back to the original definition of success as dependent on a student's attitude toward life and their individual situations.

The other common barrier was the difficulty of balancing one's social activities with academic responsibilities. One student made the observation that "most freshmen that come in aren't really aware of the impact of having absolute freedom and…you can do whatever you want now and…you can get away with this…and that." Another student admitted, "I just took school as a way to get away from home, you know…[and a student] got me involved in going places and doing stuff and having a fun time, and that's not really what I should've been doing. Needless to say, I was asked to leave for a semester." All students seemed to agree that as students matured and became better acclimated to the university climate, the social pressures became easier to handle.

Some students felt that the conditions in the classroom presented a number of barriers to student success. Specifically, participants were frustrated by their large introductory courses and by the quality of teaching in their labs. All agreed that it was difficult at best to work with Teaching Assistants who could not speak English well. They were very sympathetic to the plight of their instructors, with one student commenting,

"They're brilliant people, they just can't communicate [English] very well." One student explained the difficulty in this way: "Some of them actually cannot…speak what they're thinking clearly, so it comes out all jumbled and you kind of wonder what they're trying to say, and you maybe assume what they've said and it could be totally wrong."

In terms of their large introductory courses, students were frustrated and did not enjoying learning the material in several cases because the professor seemed to make no effort to make that class stimulating. "[These kinds of classes] leave an impression, like, 'Oh, well the teachers don't seem to care about us,' if all they seem to do is get up there and read right out of the book and tell us what we've read by quote." Another student gave the example, "I've had classes with a teacher who just gets up and starts writing notes and says, 'Okay, this is this,' writes it down, 'this is that, this is that,' okay, you know, he doesn't ask the students any questions. [If you] interrupt him to get him to answer some confusing point, then it's kind of like, 'Ugh, you're wasting my time,' you know, 'Why can't you understand this?'" They did speak very highly of teachers, however, who make an effort to break up lecture periods with activities or experiments.

Solutions to Improve the Chances of Student Success

Once again, many of the solutions that were offered by participants of these groups dealt with interventions that could be used to help students when they first arrive at the university. For example, one student felt that orientation should include very realistic discussions about the impact of freedom once you get to college and the challenges of balancing the different areas of your life. Another student felt that an older student you can get to know and can talk to would be very beneficial to a freshman student who wouldn't be comfortable going to an adult or their Resident Assistant. In addition,

participants felt that an introductory course for new students that outlined their entire program of study or outlined different programs for undecided students would help people start out better prepared.

Students also had several suggestions for improving conditions in the classroom. First, one student commented that a midterm evaluation would be much more valuable to both students and the instructor because both would be able to change and see changes in the same term. Most agreed that professors and Graduate Teaching Assistants who serve as either instructors or advisors should be screened before they are allowed to perform those functions and should be held accountable through performance reviews or the like to ensure they are meeting student needs adequately. Interestingly, one student felt that a written, essay-format test should be used by professors over a Scantron, multiple-choice type test because even though the first is harder, the student felt that more was retained in the long run by using such a test. Participants were, for the most part, very constructive in their suggestions.

Analysis of Focus Groups: Seniors

Definitions of Student Success

For the seniors, the definition reflected a much more holistic viewpoint than for the younger students, and one student even commented that good grades were not a reliable indicator that success had been attained. Participants also mentioned happiness, achieving balance in life, "coming into your own person," and seeing the educational experience as beneficial, as being better indicators of success. Contributing factors of success were the acquisition of critical thinking skills and being able to apply classroom knowledge to practical situations. One student summed up the discussion in this way: "I think the main

thing is being able to communicate your ideas and what you see and how a situation is, how it can be fixed, how you assess it, and being able to relay that knowledge to someone else and explain it and being able to work to fix a problem or answer a question. Someone who didn't have the good educational background and the knowledge and basis to work from wouldn't have the ability to function on that level."

Barriers to Student Success

The barriers that were discussed by some students were very dissimilar both to the other senior participants and to most other barriers that were mentioned in other groups. Specifically, participants seemed very bitter toward other colleges in the university and how the students felt students and faculty in these other colleges perceived them. One student explained it this way: "It's everybody against the College of Agriculture because, it seems to me that it's a big struggle between the university wanting to be a technical institute but yet it has roots in an agricultural background." Another student made this observation: "I think [this bias] is built into the university system. I mean, why would we have an Agricultural Economics department when there's an Economics department in the Business college? Why do we have an Ag. Engineering department when there's an Engineering department across the drillfield? Why do we have an Ag. Ed. when we're supposed to be one big happy family in education?" Students also shared that this perceived bias was especially difficult to handle in required classes that were outside of the college, where they felt they were not understood and were stereotyped as "farmers" or "tree huggers."

These same students also focused most of their attention on conditions in the classroom, with the factors being discussed being similar to those that had been mentioned

in previous groups. Students in this group shared that some courses, such as those in the humanities, that they are required to take did not apply to their future careers. One student commented, "I still resent that I had to pay for [a theater course] because that's not what I came here to learn." Participants also commented on the poor communication skills of some professors that made learning some subject material very difficult. The attitudes, approachability, and communication skills of some professors also were also barriers to a productive learning experience, especially if it appeared that research interests were more important than meeting student needs. To explain this further, one student commented, "I think if the students are getting frustrated you know the teacher becomes intimidated. So each person--each group is withdrawing from the other. So eventually it gets so bad that people don't come, people don't care, and the teacher's just giving out grades so she's not going to get in trouble."

Students also mentioned many different personal barriers that could hinder student success. Among these were not being prepared for college based on one's high school experience, a lack of self-discipline, and not being able to manage the many different activities to which one is committed. All participants mentioned financial pressures at different points throughout the discussions, but such pressures did not surface as a barrier. Interestingly, the pressures pertained as much toward their future situations than to their present circumstances. Specifically, one student commented, "See, if you're going into an Ag. Field, you're not going to make a whole lot of money, and if you gotta pay back $40,000 in loans then you're going to be paying your life away…." Another student shared, "Well, I pay out-of-state tuition, I work two jobs, and go to school…so it's tough and it does affect your academics, because like he said, something's gotta give. Do I pay

rent this month or do I go to lab this month?" The seniors that were interviewed gave the impression that they didn't feel that they were receiving much support, financially or otherwise, from the university.

Solutions to Improve the Chances of Student Success

Again, students in these two groups mentioned the need to improve techniques in the classroom and improve communication between faculty and students. Specifically, students felt that instructors should teach "process instead of facts," use demonstrations in their lectures, develop their own tests instead of using tests developed by textbook publishers, and ensure that there is at least one graded assignment before the final date to drop a course. In addition, students felt that faculty and others should be more proactive in communicating the availability of university resources. One participant suggested that there should be specific advising contacts in each department that won't have a research bias and will be able to give a student the time he or she requires to reach an informed decision.

Several students mentioned the need to have a "Freshman Seminar" that provided practice in such skills as time management. One student suggested that it be based on the Senior Seminar that is required in several majors: "I'm learning more about what's being offered my last semester here than I am when I should've known about it my first year here." Students also felt that freshmen should be introduced to the Degree Audit Reports as soon as they enter the university. Finally, the participants saw many benefits in the development of a mentor program for entering students: "The people I do make contact with, I know I've told them a lot of things that they would not have known otherwise. I

57

mean, to me if you just started out on the right foot, then you would be…your grades would be in tip-top shape by the time you get out of here."

Analysis of Background Surveys

Demographic surveys were given to each participant between discussions of the definition of student success and the barriers to that success. (See Appendices 3 and 4) These were distributed in an effort to gain some background knowledge of the participants as a way to provide some possible insight into the origin of their opinions on the nature of student success and its achievement. In other words, students who are generally successful may have very different opinions about student success than those students who feel they are not successful. Care was taken in designing the survey that participants would not be unduly influenced in their future responses by the questions asked of them. The researcher did not read any questionnaires until after each focus group had been completed. Again, no participant was asked to list his or her name on a questionnaire.

Faculty Survey

Based on the surveys received from faculty participants, the groups seemed to be quite balanced. Within the seven participants, six different departments were represented, and there were five men and two women participants. Three participants had been faculty at the university for ten or more years, and four had been faculty for five or fewer years. Four participants taught two or more classes, and three taught less than two classes each semester. By self-report, three participants felt they spent between 25% and 50% of their time with students, and three reported spending 10% to 25% with students. The remaining participant stated a 50% to 75% time involvement with students. See Table 1.

When asked in what capacities faculty members interacted with students, outside of the classroom, six participants named undergraduate research, five participants named club involvement and advising, four named casual or social contact, one was involved as a department head, and one was involved in a mentoring program. See Table 1.

The last three questions of the survey dealt with each faculty participant's perspective on student success. When asked of the difficulty of achieving student success for the average student, six participants stated that it was somewhat difficult while the other participant stated that it was not at all difficult. All seven participants, when asked if they felt they had fostered student success stated that they had. Finally, participants were asked for their personal definition of student success. The majority of the answers dealt with graduation or completion of a degree program and meeting one's goals, whether for one's schooling, career, or life. Other components of these definitions included maintaining good grades, participating in extracurricular activities and reaching for leadership opportunities, and being able to meet challenges (see Table 1).

Table 1: Faculty Responses to Background Survey

Survey Item	Responses	Number
Departments Represented	Animal and Poultry Sciences	1
	Agricultural and Applied Economics	2
	Agricultural Technology	1
	Biochemistry	1
	Biological Sciences Engineering	1
	Food Science and Technology	1
Gender	Male	5
	Female	2
Years at Tech	5 or fewer	4
	10 or more	3
Classes Taught per Semester	2 or less	3
	More than 2	4
Percentage of time spent interacting with students	10-25%	3
	25-50%	3
	50-75%	1
Types of interactions with students	Research	6
	Club Involvement	5
	Advising	5
	Social Contact	4
	Department Head	1
	Mentor	1
Difficulty of students achieving success	Not at all difficult	1
	Somewhat difficult	6
Had participants fostered student success?	Yes	7
	No	0

Student Survey

Freshmen. Among the freshman participants, four academic departments were represented and 5 men and 3 women participated. When asked about graduation, all participants said that they had expected to graduate on time (listed as eight semesters of enrollment). However, only five participants said they actually would be graduating on time, with the other three unsure at the time of the focus group. None had attended summer school but one participant listed that summer school was expected in the future. See Table 2.

Table 2: Student Responses to Background Survey

Survey Item:	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors
Major				
AAEC	2	1	1	1
AgED	0	0	2	0
APSC	3	4	1	1
CSES	0	0	0	1
DaSC	1	0	1	0
ENSC	0	0	1	3
HORT	2	2	0	0
Gender				
Male	5	4	4	4
Female	3	3	2	2
On entering did you expect to graduate on time?				
Yes	8	7	5	3
No	0	0	1	3
Do you now expect graduate on time?				
Yes	5	4	3	2
No	0	0	3	4
Unsure	3	3	0	0
Have you attended summer school?				
Yes	0	3	3	5
No	7	4	2	1
What grades did you expect to receive in college?				
All A's	2	0	0	0
A's and B's	3	4	3	3
B's and C's	2	3	3	3
What grades are you actually receiving in classes?				
A's and B's	2	1	1	0
B's and C's	3	5	3	5
C's and D's	3	1	2	0
Do you consider yourself a successful student?				
Yes	6	4	4	3
No	2	3	1	3
Unsure	0	0	1	0

All participants had expected grades in the range of A, B, and C before beginning

classes, with the majority expecting A and/or B grades in their college courses. In

actuality, students' self-reported grades were spread evenly through A, B, C, and D

grades. No students reported having been put either on academic probation or suspension.

When asked whether the students thought they were successful in college, only six out of the eight answered that they felt they were. This may be because five out of the eight students listed maintaining good grades as a factor in student success. Other factors that were named by the students included setting and meeting goals, being dedicated and well educated, and enjoying a healthy social life.

Sophomores. Seven sophomore participants represented three academic departments. Again, all participants had expected to graduate on time when they first arrived, but three were unsure if they actually would. The other four were confident, however, that they would complete their education in four years. Three of the seven had attended summer school by the time of the focus groups.

Again, participants had expected that their grades in college would be in the A, B, or C range, with a slight majority in the "A's & B's" category. A decided majority of students, however, reported that actual grades were in the B and C range, although grades from A to D were reported. Like the freshman participants, none of the sophomore participants reported ever being on academic probation or suspension.

When asked whether they felt they had been successful as students, only four answered yes, with the other three answering no. From the definitions of student success that they provided, two main elements emerged: maintaining good grades and meeting one's goals and expectations. Other factors included being able to apply knowledge in one's career and excelling in all collegiate arenas.

Juniors. Six juniors participated in the focus groups, consisting of four men and two women representing five academic departments. All but one had expected to graduate on time, but only half of the participants still held that conviction by the time that the focus groups were held. Half of the participants had also attended summer school since attending Virginia Tech.

Again, half of the students who participated expected grades of A or B in their college courses before they arrived at the university. Actual grades were quite varied, with students reporting A, B, C, and D averages. Half of the students admitted having been on academic probation, and two of the six had previously been on academic suspension for not maintaining academic eligibility.

When asked whether they had been successful as students, four students answered yes, one answered no, and one was unsure. Again, the main components of the definitions of student success that were offered consisted of maintaining good grades and reaching one's goals. Other elements included graduation, enjoying extracurricular activities, and applying skills learned in college to life.

Seniors. There were six total participants in the two focus groups with seniors, four male and two female students, who represented four majors. One major, however, was represented by half of the participants. In this group, only half originally expected to graduate on time, and four students shared that they indeed would not graduate on time. Five out of the six students had also attended summer school during their collegiate careers.

Half of the students had expected A and B grades in college, while the other half expected B and C averages. In actuality, half reported that they were receiving B and C

grades, with the other half reporting ranges from A to D. Only one student in this group had ever been on academic probation, and none had been on academic suspension while at the university.

When asked whether they felt they were successful as students, only half responded positively, with the other three not feeling that they had reached success by their senior year. The more popular answers for these students when asked to define student success included happiness and being able to apply knowledge in the future. Other components included a feeling that one's education had been beneficial, recognition from peers, maintaining good grades, and being a well-rounded person.

Comparisons of Faculty and Student Perceptions

Definitions of Student Success

For faculty participants, student success essentially meant maintaining academic success, securing a position in a chosen career field, graduation, and being able to apply lessons learned during the college experience to other situations in life. The student groups were fairly similar in the information that they provided during their interviews. The most common element of student success that was mentioned by the groups was to simply be happy or satisfied with your experience in college. Stemming from that, students took a much more vague approach to student success, referring to a proficiency in all academic subjects, achieving a balance of all the elements of one's life, gaining practical experience to apply to the future, and achieving one's goals. Students mentioned that maintaining good grades, graduating, and participating both in and out of class were indicators that one had achieved or was working towards achieving student success, but in the end it was the student who determined whether success had indeed been reached.

Barriers to Student Success

There were definite similarities to what faculty and student groups considered barriers to students' achievement of success. Barriers that were referred to throughout the faculty discussions included a lack of maturity, lack of motivation, and poor time management skills. Also mentioned by both groups was a participation in too many extra-curricular activities and not enough contact with faculty. An interesting point to note was that only the second group touched on financial and family pressures as a barrier, although the first group did mention the need for additional financial aid during the course of the discussion.

Students also focused on the need for better time management and study skills in discussing barriers. In addition, participants noted a lack of discipline, participation in too many social activities, and an overall difficulty working in the college academic environment due to faculty and teaching style, class size, or grading methods as hindering their success. The only differences were found among the freshman who related many barriers to their experiences in high school and among the seniors who seemed to prefer to blame the institutional system for their problems. On the other hand, several groups mentioned frustration in working with the graduate teaching assistants due to various communication problems. The freshmen and sophomore groups mentioned a lack of preparation for the college environment as a barrier, and about half of the student focus groups mentioned personal problems as a barrier, stemming from difficulty with family, friends, and financial pressures.

Solutions to Improve the Chances of Student Success

Many of the solutions that were offered by both students and the faculty were related to academic improvements either in the classroom or related to it. Faculty participants were concerned mainly with participation in the classroom through the use of unannounced quizzes to improve attendance and by improving group and public speaking assignments. Students were more interested in improving the accessibility or teaching styles of faculty, increasing the use and improving the quality of computers and other instructional technology, and providing more practical experience and training in basic skills through coursework.

The bulk of the other solutions to improve the chances of student success centered on communication in the university, primarily in terms of academic advising and orientation. Most groups felt very strongly about extending orientation into the first semester through assigning mentors, improving introductory courses, and ensuring that students are aware of available university resources before they encounter difficulties. In terms of advising, faculty saw the need for more frequent and more intensive advising, whereas students focused on the approachability and accessibility of advisors as elements that needed improvement. Solutions that were discussed were generally constructive in nature and had merit.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of Study

This study sought to determine how faculty and students perceive student success and its achievement at a large southeastern land-grant university. Students and faculty who were interviewed for this research were very interested in the philosophy of the project and were more than happy to offer the perspectives of their own personal experiences. A freshman student summed it up well: "Hopefully somebody--if we don't benefit from it, hopefully somebody down the road does. I mean, that's the only thing I hope to see. I hope we didn't waste your time and I hope you didn't waste ours--that somebody actually does something about what we had to say."

Purposes

This study was designed for three purposes. First, the researcher sought to define student success based on the perspectives of student and faculty populations within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Second, the researcher sought to identify the barriers to student success. Finally, the researcher sought to identify strategies that would foster student success.

Research Questions

With these purposes in mind, focus groups were conducted first with students from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech during the spring semester of 1997. That data was compared with data from faculty focus groups conducted in the spring 1998 semester in an attempt to find answers to the following research questions:

- How do students at different academic levels and faculty members define student success?

- What barriers do faculty and students at different academic levels see that are encountered in trying to achieve student success?

- What do faculty and students at different academic levels feel is needed to help improve the chances of student success?

- How do the perspectives of student success compare and contrast between faculty and students at different academic levels?

Analysis

The study produced massive amounts of qualitative data. Every participant generated a list of up to ten specific barriers that he or she perceived were obstacles to student success at Virginia Tech. Each focus group participated in a 90-minute to two-hour discussion in which they addressed the following questions:

1. How do you define student success?

2. What do you feel are the barriers to student success at Virginia Tech?

3. What solutions to those barriers can you suggest?

The focus groups were tape-recorded and the recordings were transcribed. Comparing the transcripts from freshman, sophomore, junior, senior and faculty focus groups allowed for multiple perspectives providing both triangulation and confirmation, as Marshall and Rossman (1989) described.

Although this research cannot be generalized either to the university population or even to the population within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech, this research would not be complete without a discussion of the overall findings

discovered from these ten focus groups. The data that were generated as a result of this research were analyzed internally and compared to the external research on student success which was discussed in Chapter 2. Overall, findings from this study are consistent with external research. During this analysis, a number of important themes emerged.

Emergent Themes

Defining Success

Success is in the Eye of the Beholder. Faculty and students have somewhat differing perspectives on student success. Faculty participants were more interested in the academic elements of being successful, while students placed more weight on what they felt were personal indicators of success, such as happiness. In terms of the barriers to student success that were discussed, students were much more likely to discuss barriers that were outside of their control, such as the classroom environment. Faculty, on the other hand, concentrated on the personal characteristics of students, feeling that they ultimately had personal responsibility for their success. Based on the questionnaires, the groups were fairly well balanced and represented a fairly wide range of collegiate experiences.

For those who participated in these focus groups, student success is a construct that for the most part is defined by the individual person. Most who were interviewed agreed that student success could be characterized through external measures such as high academic marks or graduation. However, the true attainment of success for students is, in the end, determined only by the students themselves. Characteristics of this deeper kind of success include satisfaction with one's collegiate experience and maintaining happiness and self-esteem while in college. These viewpoints are consistent with Arnold's (1995) long-

69

term studies with former high school valedictorians, whose grades and accomplishments did not impact their determination of personal success as much as their attitudes did.

Based on this research, then, student success is defined as the accomplishment of one's goals during a college or university tenure, assessed by the individual through a measure of satisfaction or self-esteem, and externally perceived usually through the attainment of high academic marks and other collegiate accomplishments. Truly, success is in the eye of the beholder.

Barriers

When the researcher analyzed the barriers that were named and then discussed in each focus group, it was found that there was a great deal of consistency across the population that was studied. Although participants named every single barrier without prior suggestion, the researcher was able to organize all barriers into five emergent themes (See Appendix 6). Although the difficulties discovered are consistent with those found by researchers such as Astin (1993) and Pace (1979), we must consider that it is discovery of the barriers unique to a particular college or university that would prove invaluable to those invested in fostering student success. The overall barriers to student success as determined from this research follow.

Unproductive faculty/student relationships. The first and most frequently mentioned barrier to student success was unproductive faculty/student interactions. This difficulty was experienced both in and out of the classroom, and appeared to be caused in part by a lack of congruence between teaching and learning styles. For example, students often found it difficult to learn in a large lecture class and instead wanted more practical, hands-on experiences: "[These kinds of classes] leave an impression, like, 'Oh, well the

teachers don't seem to care about us,' if all they seem to do is get up there and read right out of the book and tell us what we've read by quote." The persistence of lecture classes despite student preference may partially be explained by Schroeder's (1993) research using the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator test to evaluate the differences in teaching and learning preferences between faculty and students. Although students in that study also preferred practical examples to explain new concepts, faculty preferred instead to engage in abstract, reflective exercises to describe new concepts.

In a much broader sense, students simply needed faculty to be more accessible and more willing to help students. Faculty also expressed a frustration that their many responsibilities and the large student-to-faculty ratio prevented them from committing the time they wanted to students and their academic development. An unexpected, related finding was the expression of disappointment and sometimes bitterness that there was a lack of communication among the members of the different departments of the university, which at times caused problems.

Personal Obstacles. The next barriers that were most frequently mentioned as impeding student success for undergraduates consisted of mental obstacles which students placed on themselves and a lack of skills which prevented them from making the most of their college experience. This provides validation to Lindren's (1969) belief that the two major reasons for failure as a student were a lack of skills and a poor attitude. In addressing these mental blocks, a lack of motivation was mentioned most often, followed by a lack of direction or ambition: "Not to be stereotypical or anything but I guess you can put those people who haven't declared a major by their Junior year in that--they are just here going to class…but [they don't] have any internal drive or determination to succeed

71

or to get anything done." Students and faculty also frequently mentioned a lack of maturity or self-discipline, which also hindered collegiate success.

Students and faculty both described many different skills in which undergraduates were lacking. Nearly all groups mentioned troubles with time management and study habits, which included pressures from social and extra-curricular activities. Coupled with this lack of proficiency in managing time and studying effectively was a feeling of stress and anxiety, which further affected their productivity and eventually impacted their attitudes towards themselves and their university experience: "I think that a lot of times the student may know where they want to go, but they just don't know how to get there."

Lack of preparation for college. The final two barriers that were discovered during these focus group interviews concern lack of preparation. Specifically, participants described a lack of academic preparedness and a lack of financial preparedness. Many students expressed regret that they had not allowed themselves to be challenged in high school and had relied so heavily on their parents for guidance and discipline until college: "I mean, you don't have your parents over there leaning over your shoulder telling you to study." However, many students who were high achievers in high school expressed their surprise at the sudden increase in academic difficulty of subject material when they arrived at Virginia Tech as a freshman: "…it's a big adjustment…coming into college and getting 'Cs' when you got 'As' in high school…." Students and faculty both voiced their disappointment that so many worthy students were going without subsidized financial aid and so had to decide between working their way through school or incurring severe debt through loans: "there is a significant proportion [of students] where the parents could contribute more and they don't for one reason or another and this puts more pressure on

the students." Although some researchers (Larose and Roy, 1991; House, 1993) have used high school criterion to help predict undergraduate performance, no research was analyzed during this study that sought to describe the various factors that help to ensure college preparedness for graduating high school seniors.

Solutions

In terms of solutions, faculty concentrated on the need for students to become more active both in the classroom and in university programs. Students, instead, focused on ways in which faculty members and other university personnel could both improve the academic environment and be more accessible to and better communicators with students.

Although faculty and students had many different suggestions for improving the chances of student success, there were two main similarities. First, participants seemed interested not necessarily in the creation of new programs but with improving communication within the university to ensure the awareness of programs that already exist. Participants also felt that orientation activities for new students should be extended well into their first semester at the university to ensure that these students had access to various resources before a problem was encountered, academic or otherwise. Most of the research reviewed for this study, however, dealt not with improving current programs as much as suggesting developing further measures to improve the chances of student success (Grevatt, 1992, Friedlander and MacDougall, 1993). Analysis of the focus groups conducted for this study shows that a more valuable emphasis in future endeavors to improve chances of student success may simply be to ensure that current techniques are being employed as widely and as efficiently as possible for maximum benefit.

Improve classroom techniques. Participants from every focus group had suggestions for improving the classroom environment by modifying various techniques. Most of the comments on this topic concerned either testing strategies or lecturing techniques, and several students emphasized the need for real-world applications of their classwork: "I like professors who, you know, use real-life experiences or stories to tell, to teach you, and then tie it all together with slides. Almost like a—just a presentation in general instead of just copying notes and studying your notes and memorizing." This theme directly correlates to the barrier theme of unproductive faculty/student interactions.

Improve and extend orientation. Another area that received much attention from participants when discussing solutions that could be implemented to combat barriers to student success was the process of orienting freshmen to the university. Many participants focused on the need to extend the orientation experience into the first year a student is at college: "how much are you really paying attention to these nitpicky details they're throwing at you in June and July when you…don't know how that relates…or …applies." Other participants suggested that upperclassmen mentors could provide a more informal orientation to the university and serve as an invaluable resource for freshmen students. Some students even suggested that the orientation process should begin in high school to allow even more time for students to prepare for college. This category of solutions correlates with two different barrier themes mentioned previously: lack of skills and lack of academic preparation.

Improve communication in the university. As a further response to the barrier of unproductive faculty/student interactions, many participants voiced the need for improved communication in the university. For many participants, surviving the rigors of college

was, in the end, not a matter of a lack of will so much as a lack of knowledge. Students commented that many times they were either unsure a resource existed or were unsure of the procedures involved to access that resource: "I got a letter…that said, you know, basically shape up and, you know, it was nice…but that's all I got. I mean, I didn't get any sheets that said where I could go for help or who I could get tutoring from." Several students were also very frustrated that a distant relationship with their advisors also prevented adequate communication of academic policies or opportunities.

Discussion and Implications

Achieving student success at a college or university is a very complicated issue, as was evident through the focus groups that were conducted. Perspective and personal circumstance must be taken into account when exploring student success, which explains the difficulty inherent in coming to overall conclusions. This study is generally consistent with existing research on the nature and achievement of student success at the university level (eg.: Astin, 1993; Pace, 1979). However, these focus groups have forced us to consider the very personal dimension of student success including the variable conditions that can determine that success. Even so, this research reminds us of the common experiences that all students, regardless of background or potential, face when dealing with student success during their collegiate tenure. That the faculty participants had come to similar conclusions about student success and the barriers to its achievement was quite encouraging.

It is interesting to note the fundamental difference in perspective between faculty and students in this study. Faculty appeared to hold students accountable for their own lack of success because they felt there were more than sufficient opportunities available to

achieve success. Students, on the other hand, place part of the responsibility on the educational system and components such as class scheduling, instructor approachability, and instructor performance. They also admit to generating part of the problem with their own lack of dedication and discipline.

Even with that fundamental lack of agreement between faculty and students on student success, the results of this study were somewhat encouraging. At the very least, faculty and students had essentially similar viewpoints concerning both the basic elements of student success and its achievement. This observation must be made with caution, however, because faculty who agreed to participate and then actually participated in our focus groups may have been more involved with students than the population of faculty in general.

This method of research can easily be applied to a needs assessment system that examines the central constituents of the university, the faculty and students, to discover both where the students' problems lie and the measures that should be taken to improve student success. Faculty and students may also feel more ownership and, therefore, commitment to the university if they are given the chance to actively participate in the development of interventions or policies.

Finally, it is important that once the information from these focus groups has been collected and analyzed that it be disseminated to the university community at-large. The information presented by these participants is very valuable and can provide inspiration and awareness for other faculty and students who seek understanding and ways to improve their own situations. If we as researchers can help them in this way, they will certainly continue to help us.

76

REFERENCES

Abrams, H. G. and Jernigan, L. P. (1984). Academic support services and the success of high-risk college students. American Educational Research Journal, 21(2), 261-274.

Arnold, K. D. (1995). Lives of Promise: What Becomes of High School Valedictorians. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Astin, A. W. (1991). Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education. New York: American Council on Education, Macmillan Publishing Company.

Astin, A. W. (1993). What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Balkin, J. (1987). Psychological correlates of success in college. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 47, 795-798.

Bers, T. H. and Smith, K. (1988). Focus groups and community college research: lessons from a study of nontraditional students. Community College Review, 15(4), 52-58.

Blackhurst, A. and Pearson, F. (1996). Student and instructor perceptions: emphasis on cognitive and affective goals in a freshman seminar by faculty and student affairs professionals. NASPA Journal, 34(1), 57-66.

Blanks, F. (1997) 1997-1998 Student Success Projects. Interim report to the Committee for Student Success, Office of the Provost.

Boutsen, F. R. and Colbry, S. L. (1991). Single-parent college students' attributions toward academic success. Psychology in the Schools, 28, 360-364.

Brozo, W. G. and Schmelzer, R. V. (1985). Faculty perceptions of student behaviors: a comparison of two universities. Journal of College Student Personnel, 26(3), 229-234.

Chickering, A. W. and Reisser L. (1993). Education and Identity. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

DeVitis, J. L. and Rich, J. M. (1996). The Success Ethic, Education, and the American Dream. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Fralick, M. A. (1993). College success: a study of positive and negative attrition. Community College Review, 20(5), 29-36.

Friedlander, J. and MacDougall, P. (1993). Achieving student success through student involvement. Community College Review, 20(1), 20-28.

Gigliotti, R. J. and Secrest, S. E. (1988). Academic success expectancy: the interplay of gender, situation, and meaning. Research in Higher Education, 29(4), 281-296.

Glasser, W. (1997). A new look at school failure and school success. Phi Delta Kappan, 78(4), 597-602.

Grevatt, W. K. (1992). Student Success Program. Descriptive report prepared for the Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, 9p.

Hamilton, R. and Ghatala, E. (1994). Learning and Instruction. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Higbee, J. and Dwinell, P. (1996). Correlates of self-esteem among high risk students. Research & Teaching in Developmental Education, 12(2), 41-50.

Horn, C.; Bruning, R.; Schraw, G.; Curry, E. and Katkanant, C. (1993). Paths to success in the college classroom. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 18, 464-478.

House, J. D. (1993). Achievement expectancies as predictors of academic performance. International Journal of Instructional Media, 20(3), 213-223.

Kaase, K. J. and Harshbarger, D. B. (1993). Applying focus groups in student affairs assessment. NASPA Journal, 30(4), 284-289.

Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus Groups: A Guide for Applied Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Krull, C. D. and Pierce, W. D. (1995). IQ testing in America: a victim of its own success. The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 41(3), 349-354.

Larose, S. and Roy, R. (1991). The role of prior academic performance and nonacademic attributes in the prediction of the success of high-risk college students. Journal of College Student Development, 32, 171-177.

Lindren, H. C. (1969). The Psychology of Student Success. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Livengood, J. M. (1992). Students' motivational goals and beliefs about effort and ability as they relate to college academic success. Research in Higher Education, 33(2), 247-261.

Lomo-David, E. and Hulbert, J. (1993). Instructor classroom behaviors and student academic success. Business Education Forum, 47, 12-15.

Mann, K. B. (1988). Recognition programs for academic success: improvement or achievement? NASSP Bulletin, 72, 101-102.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. B. (1989). Designing Qualitative Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Massie, S. (1998). College of Agriculture and Life Sciences: Facts and Statistics, 2p. Available from: http://web.cals.vt.edu/facts.html.

Milton, S. and Mattox, R. J. (1988). A study of the imposter phenomemon in high-achieving college students. Journal of College Student Development, 29, 380-381.

Moos, R. H. (1979). Evaluating Educational Environments. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Muffo, J. (1996). Core Values. Quality Improvement in Action, January 1996, 2p. Available from: http://www.vt.edu:10021/admin/assess/QIAJan96.html

Nicklin, J. L. (1996). Colleges turn to focus groups to learn how to appeal to students and donors. The Chronicle of Higher Education, August 2, 1996, A25-A26.

Pace, C. R. (1979). Measuring Outcomes of College: Fifty Years of Findings and Recommendations for the Future. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Pace, C. R. (1990). The Undergraduates: A Report of Their Activities and Progress in College in the 1980's. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Evaluation, University of California.

Pallas, A. M. (1993). Schooling in the course of human lives: the social context of education and the transition to adulthood in industrial society. Review of Educational Research, 63(4), 409-447.

Rea, D. W. (1991). College students' perceptions of academic success: an examination of motivational orientation. Teaching of Psychology, 18(2), 109-111.

Research Division (1993). Application for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects. Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Ridenour, M. E. (1997). Update to the University Plan 1996-2001, The Implementation Plan: the Academic Agenda. Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Russell, L. A. (1991). Assessing campus racism: the use of focus groups. Journal of College Student Development, 32, 271-272.

Schonwetter, D. J.; Perry, R. P. and Struthers, C. W. (1993). Students' perceptions of control and success in the college classroom: affects and achievement in different instructional conditions. Journal of Experimental Education, 61(3), 227-246.

Schroeder, C. C. (1993). New students--new learning styles. Change, Sept/Oct issue, 21-26.

Schroeder, C. C. and Jackson, G. S. (1987). Creating conditions for student development in campus living environments. NASPA Journal, 25(1), 45-53.

Scott, D. W. (1995). Conditions related to the academic performance of African American students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

Sprinthall, N. A. and Scott, J. R. (1989). Promoting psychological development, math achievement, and success attribution of female students through deliberate psychological education. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 36(4), 440-446.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. (1987). Springfield, MA: Mirriam-Webster, Inc.

Wheeler, J. J. (1996). The use of interactive focus groups to aid in the identification of perceived service and support delivery needs of persons with developmental disabilities and their families. Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, --, 294-303.

Wilbrink, B. (1997). Assessment in historical perspective. Studies in Educational Evaluation, 23(1), 31-48.

Wirth, A. G. (1971). Education in the Technological Society: The Vocational-Liberal Studies Controversy in the Early Twentieth Century. Washington, DC: University Press of America.

Wolfe, J. S. (1993). Institutional integration, academic success, and persistence of first-year commuter and resident students. Journal of College Student Development, 34(3), 321-326.

APPENDIX 1: TELEPHONE SCRIPT USED TO INVITE STUDENTS

Hi, is this (name of student)?

My name is _____ and I am calling you in reference to a project I'm working on for the College of Ag and Life Sciences.

The purpose of the project is to examine barriers to student success at Virginia Tech, and you have been selected to participate in a group discussion to help us discover, explain, and help find solutions to these barriers. Your participation is important because you represent a large number of students in the College of Ag, and your input could affect what our college does to help students in the future.

We would like for you to participate in a group discussion on _____, beginning at _____. We will be serving pizza and soft drinks as a meal. If you agree to participate, the group interview session should last about two hours.

Note for Rebecca and Dana:

If the student asks questions, the information below might be helpful:

EXTENT OF ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
The researcher will at no time release names or any other identifiable information regarding the participants. All audio tapes will be destroyed. Participants are expected to maintain confidentiality regarding discussion that occurs during the focus group interviews.

FREEDOM TO WITHDRAW
You are free to withdraw from the research at any time during the process.

APPROVAL OF RESEARCH
The Institutional Review Board for projects involving human subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University has approved this study.

Other questions and concerns about this research or its conduct could be addressed to Professor William G. Camp, Principal Investigator, at 231-8188.

APPENDIX 2: E-MAIL SCRIPT USED TO INVITE FACULTY

My name is Anne Dean and I'm a grad student working with Dr. Camp in Agricultural Education. I'm writing because as part of my thesis I'm conducting a series of focus groups to discuss student success within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and was wondering if you would be interested in participating in one of these groups.

I will be conducting my first group this Thursday from 4:00-5:30 in Litton Reaves 2350 (that's the conference room across from the elevators on the second floor), and will also be conducting a group the following Thursday, March 5th at the same time and at the same location.

If you could contact me at 961-5443, or send an e-mail to anned@vt.edu to let me know whether or not you'd be able to attend one of these groups, I would really appreciate it. Thank you very much, and I look forward to hearing from you very soon!

Sincerely,

Anne Dean
GA, Student Success Projects
231-5866(o)
961-5443(h)
anned@vt.edu

APPENDIX 3: FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRE

STUDENT SUCCESS FOCUS GROUP: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

To supplement the information obtained in the discussion, please take a few minutes to complete the following questionnaire about your experiences here at Virginia Tech.

Department:_____   Gender: M   F

How many years have you been a faculty member at Virginia Tech? _____

What is your typical teaching load (# of classes)?   1   2   3   4 or more

About what percentage of time do you spend interacting with students?

Less than 10%   10-25%   25-50%   50-75%   75-90%   More than 90%

In what capacities (besides teaching) do you interact with students?
(check all that apply)

_____advising
_____clubs/organizations
_____research
_____casual/social
_____other (please explain_____)

How difficult, in your opinion, is it for the average student here at Virginia Tech to achieve student success?   very difficult   somewhat difficult   not at all difficult

According to your definition of student success, have you helped to foster student success here at Virginia Tech?   Y   N

What is your definition of student success?_____
_____

APPENDIX 4: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

STUDENT SUCCESS INTERVENTION PROJECT: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

To supplement the information obtained in the discussion, please take a few moments to complete the following questionnaire about your academic expectations and subsequent experiences here at Virginia Tech.

Major:_____   Gender: M   F

Year of Enrollment (circle one):   1992   1993   1994   1995   1996

Term of Enrollment (circle one):   Fall   Spring   1st Summer   2nd Summer

Anticipated Date of Graduation: Term_____   Year_____

Have you attended summer school since enrolling at Virginia Tech?   Y   N

If yes, when and where did you attend?_____
_____

How many hours did you complete during summer school?_____

When you enrolled at Virginia Tech, what were the average grades that you expected?
        All A's   A's & B's   B's & C's   C's & D's   _____

What kind of grades have you actually received since you've been enrolled at Virginia Tech?   All A's   A's & B's   B's & C's   C's & D's   _____

How many semesters did you think it would take you to graduate?_____

How many semesters will it actually take you to graduate?_____

Have you ever been on academic probation?   Y   N   How many times?_____

Have you ever been on academic suspension?   Y   N   How many times?_____

According to your definition of student success, have you been academically successful at Virginia Tech?   Y   N

What is your definition of student success?_____
_____

APPENDIX 5: FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Welcoming

Good afternoon everyone.
On behalf of the project team, I would like to thank you for your willingness to serve as a participant in this research process. As you know, the purpose of this research is to explore the barriers to student success at the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech.

Questions that will be asked require that you share your personal perceptions on the topic. The information that you share is very important and will be used to improve the services offered by CALS in ensuring student success.

It is very important that during this interview you be completely honest. I encourage you to share your feelings and opinions openly. Please not that in these discussions, there are no right or wrong answers, rather a rich account of your experiences and perspectives.

During the discussion, feel free to ask for clarification when necessary, and do not hesitate to question or agree with other group members. To ensure that everyone has the opportunity to be heard and to express their opinions, I ask that only one person speak at a time, and try to avoid side conversations.

Confidentiality is very important. The information collected here should in no way be shared outside the group. Any information reported in the analysis will be reported under aliases. This session will be audiotaped to ensure accuracy of your responses. After the analysis, tapes will be erased. Do I have permission from everyone to tape this session?

FACILITATOR ASKS FOR QUESTIONS, COMMENT'S OR CONCERNS

Self-Introduction

Before we continue, let me introduce myself.
THE TAPE SHOULD BE STARTED AT THIS TIME
Other project team members introduce themselves.
Participants introduce themselves.

The Interview Protocol

Our purpose today is to discover and explore the barriers to student success at the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech.

For a start, you will each be given five index cards. Use the cards to write one phrase that would describe your answers. Limit your response to seven words because you will have an opportunity to elaborate on your answers. You will have 3-5 minutes to outline your thoughts. For each response, use a different card. The question that I need you to respond to is: "What are the barriers to student success at CALS, Virginia Tech?"

As you complete your cards, please pass them to the co-facilitator. After everyone has finished writing their responses, the group will be asked to cluster the cards.

ALLOW 3-5 MINUTES FOR WRITING RESPONSES

Clustering the Cards

Please gather at the end of the table and cluster the cards. This should be done without talking. After clustering the cards, leave them at the end of the table and be seated.

ALLOW 3-5 MINUTES FOR CLUSTERING THE CARDS

While the clustering is going on, notice such things as body language, how clustering occurs, group interaction during clustering, behaviors, etc. After clustering, ask participants to go back to their seats. The co-facilitator should begin placing clusters on the flip chart. While information is being placed on the flip chart, the facilitator can discuss reactions and feelings during the clustering process.

EXPLAIN: The reason we asked you not to talk was because we did not want your intents and opinions to be biased by other group members.

Discussion

The discussion of the question will revolve around the clusters of information you have provided. I would like to begin with the first cluster on the board. What overall theme would you attach to this cluster? Why do you believe these are barriers to student success at CALS?

Possible probes are:
Could you describe an example of that?
Would you describe how often this occurs?
What do you mean by that?
Could you elaborate on that?

Closure

After the interview, ask the participants if there is anything they would like to add. If not, thank the group again and terminate the interview.

APPENDIX 6: BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Introduction

After participants had listed barriers on index cards and grouped them into categories, the focus group discussion was continued. The facilitator began each part of this discussion by naming the barriers that participants had listed a particular category and then asking participants to elaborate on their opinions or on the reasons behind their associating the various barriers. The remaining barrier groupings were handled in the same way.

When the researcher began her analysis of the transcriptions, then, part of the process was to pull out from the discussion each of these barriers that were named as well as any particularly relevant comments made about them. After analysis was completed for each of the participant groups (See Chapter 4), the barriers were extracted from all of the groups and were sorted by similarity into themes. Listed below are the results of that second, overall, analysis: the discovery of five overarching barriers to student success that were voiced by those participating in this research.

Unproductive Faculty/Student Interactions

Grades—concentrate more on grades than learning—teachers have different ways of grading/testing—just show that you test well

Professors and TA teaching styles—poor study skills—combination of how person studies and how person teaches

Not being in the right major—not relating well to faculty, subject matter, advisor—not utilizing university resources—not having good experiences in high school

Little contact with faculty—barrier to talk—intimidation

Not enough advisors—scheduling problems because of misdirection

Presentation of lecture-overheads, slides, handouts—office hours and help sessions—teacher-student relations—willingness to help student outside of classroom—TA assistance

Difference between farming and agriculture—engineering process—when looking for jobs, people tend to shy away from Ag degrees

Labs put constraints on other activities—hard to fit in schedule

Uninteresting professors make learning subject difficult—professors that can't speak English well—also interested more in research and not good communicators—easier when professor's approachable

Lack of opportunities in specific fields—constant worry about competition—if you haven't had same opportunities as others, you feel they're one step ahead of you

Foreign faculty—language/communication problems

Incorrect information in the handbook—incomplete descriptions

Tutors not available on regular basis—more than one professor teaches class—more professor involvement—office hours—can't learn from some styles

Labs taught by non-English-speaking TAs—can't understand—brilliant but don't know how to communicate it—problem in Chemistry, Math, Physics

Scheduling problems—hard to sort through checklist

Large classes—impersonal discussions—feel isolated in class

Professors of engineering courses don't like non-engineers in their classes—Ag college viewed as separate from rest of Tech—engineering professors not willing to teach non-engineers—BIAS—university wants to be technical but came from Ag. Background—"everybody against Ag"

Bias of advisors—particular teachers only teaching a class—professor cares more about research than about students—styles of teaching may or may not fit—other professors not willing to help if you're not their advisee—some have no people skills

Other departments not completely knowing what you do/know—can't compete with students from other backgrounds

Large classes—material not made stimulating—professors don't ask questions, only lecture, not willing to move at students' pace—gives impression that teachers really don't care

Institutional limitations—class hours—poor learning environments

Feeling classes do not pertain to what you want to do in the future—being forced to take Humanities classes—incorrect advice from advisors—academic uncertainty

TAs—not enough professors—"paying 17k to go here to listen to TAs (5/7 classes)"—like giving us a student teacher

Mental Obstacles

Lack of motivation

Dorm living for loners—forced to live in dorm—no drive to achieve goals—no discipline—fear of failure—too many activities other than classes—going to school because their parents said so—personal barriers

Lack of motivation and goals—not realizing effort—not taking personal responsibility for success

Things that block your path

Lack of mission—don't know why you're at college

Maturity—how to survive—lack of ambition

Personal and family problems—accept who you are—put mind in place other than school

Incompetence—no ambition to succeed—negative attitude—affects confidence

Personal barriers

Not knowing where you want to go—lack of direction

Self-esteem and criticism—need to use criticism to advance yourself

Lack of motivation—no discipline

Being unsure of future goals—lack of self-discipline

Don't have clear goals or expectations—adjustment period—feeling of invincibility

Lack of Skills

Improper study habits—time management—effort to perform—social activities—lack of studying—lack of personal judgement

Social activities—too many, poor judgement, peer pressure

Social life of student—involvement in activities—attitudes toward school—ability to work—social attitudes and environment

Poor role models—academic talent and skills—communication skills—reluctance to lead

Not being able to pace workload—missing assignments—cramming

Involvement in extra-curricular activities—lab conflicts with select activities—conflicts with lab and sports

Time management—class attendance

Too many activities competing for time—time management—pressures from faculty

Time management—heavy class load—set standards and limitations—not enough time to accomplish all goals—balancing life and school

Poor study habits—equate hours with study, but don't study effectively

Peer pressure to spend too much time socializing

Test preparation—stress—too much work in too little time—test anxiety—too much reading for classes—tests on one day—need for time management

Peer pressure—most people procrastinate

Study skills—students arrive at different levels

Time—time management—involvement in too many extra-curricular activities—too much work

Lack of Academic Preparedness

Sudden acceleration in academics—stressed out with load—curve as problematic

Change in lifestyle—maturity—social life—social activities—society expectations—stereotypes—takes time to adjust from structured environment at home

Didn't take high school seriously

Knowing people—hard to participate if you don't know other people in class

Not disciplined enough—no study skills, rules, motivation, encouragement—I wouldn't treat high school like I did—would be more prepared for college

Different style of schooling for unprepared high school students—taking too many hard classes in one semester—overwhelming feeling of being at big school with lots of pressure—adjustment period—90% of high school got good grades without doing work

Understanding/following professors' train of thought—12 years of school—exploration of academics and courses—adjusting to college with different level tests, size of classes, more thought questions, professors philosophizing too much

Drugs, alcohol use—lose control after breaking away from parents—"you can get anything you want to get"—country people handle it better than city people—not tolerated by students in Ag. College

Familiarity with the barriers of college—high school students aren't prepared

<center>Lack of Financial Preparedness</center>

Financial problems—working full-time with full class load—have trouble getting scholarships—stress to maintain eligibility

External pressures—family and social problems—financial pressures—ability to handle stress

Social activities constantly interrupting—jobs—dorm life too noisy—difficult to concentrate—homework and tendency to procrastinate

Financial barriers—stress from money—impossible to get good job and good grades—can't learn where you want—need someone paying for you to go to school

Having to work—financial resources—working to pay for school—scholarships down, tuition up—working late