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Teacher Learning Community: Retention  
April 2008

Reviewing and Understanding Causative factors in Student Retention/Drop-Out Rates

**My chosen focus was on time and timing as quality control factors.**

I will put the word Time or Timing in parenthesis for your consideration.

First of all last winter, I deliberately **added a day** to my course schedule. Initially I thought I might need it as a snow make-up day. Since I didn't use it for that purpose, I anonymously polled my class and asked them for ideas about how they would like to use that extra time. Their suggestions were unique and excellent. Most requested additional instruction about various topics. Since there was a tie for 2 subjects, I split the extra class time and gave them what they requested. (Time)

Amazingly the atmosphere of the last class changed and the students relaxed – so much so that I may do this ½ way through a future class instead of waiting for the end of the course to see if the response is the same. (Timing)

I liked the results of offering my students this choice of deciding how to best use this extra time. It recharged and empowered them to make a thoughtful decision.

Secondly, I used a technique that I learned in an adjunct symposium last year. It is called the **What's Up Group**. It is an extended study/buddy group. The rules and possible reward (grade points) were typed up and given to the class on the first day. The students have to register with me to establish intention, accountability in the project's use and motivation. It was optional and there was no penalty for not participating.

The essence of this project was to encourage more student responsibility and self-discipline. It also helps the students to bond and support one another when a member of the group was late, left early or missed a class. It asked the members to be aware of their surroundings and to take the initiative to respond.

It actually freed up some time for me because most of the make-up work was discussed between the group members. (Time)

It benefited some of the students who shared several classes and schedules. They did not have to wait for an appointment with me in my weekly office hour before class. (Time & timing)

These 2 projects led me to ponder the essence of **time and timing** and how, as instructors, our use of these elements can prepare and benefit the students (or not).

**Note:** Here are the statistics from the *New Mexico Community College Performance Based Indicators*.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2007 Annual success of 49 Courses, here is the summary of the percentage of students who were taking 9 or more credit hours & were successful after 3 years:

68.1% successful after 3 years (Time)

14.6% complete within 150% of time (Timing) Is this a problem??

This report was also broken down into ethnic groups showing Native American and Hispanic students were slightly less successful than White.

I don't pretend to be able to decipher this but I wonder if the length of the courses and the self-discipline skills for the second group were as well developed.

There is a time and a place for everything. As a community, we are becoming aware of the consequences of wasted time during the formative years and of the lack of discipline in childhood. Fortunately it is never too late to address it. (Timing)

Wouldn't it be great to partner with the 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers and help them to help the students at an early age! Then collegiate staff might be in a better position to simply continuing helping the students when they pass through SJC doors rather than be rushed to add remedial work to their already busy curriculum! (Time)

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I surfed the Internet and came across The Stanford Marshmallow Study – Delayed Gratification: the Key to Long Term Success (Self-Discipline) <sup>2</sup> Just its name intrigued me so I read more about it. (Timing)

In the 1960's a Stanford University psychology researcher, Michael Mischel designed a long term study of a group of 400 4-year old children. He put them all in a room and set one marshmallow in front of each. He said that he had to go do an errand that would take between 15 & 20 minutes. They could eat the marshmallow immediately if they wanted to BUT if they waited for him to return, he would give them two marshmallows.

The results were as follows:

1/3 ate the marshmallow immediately

1/3 waited a very short time and then ate the marshmallow

1/3 of the students waited the full time and received a second marshmallow.

The researchers followed this group of 400 throughout their schooling and into their young adulthood.

“The results were dramatic.

Those who had deferred eating the marshmallow for 15-20 minutes in order to get the bigger prize were more socially competent, effective, self-assertive and better able to cope with the

frustrations of life. They were less likely to go to pieces, freeze, regress under stress or become rattled and discouraged when pressured. They embraced challenges, and pursued them instead of giving up even in the face of difficulties. They were more self-reliant, confident, trustworthy, and dependable...

More than a decade later, they could still delay instant gratification in the pursuit of their goals. According to their parents' evaluations, these children who waited were academically superior, could better put their ideas into words, use and respond to reason, could concentrate better; were more eager to learn and could make plans and follow through."

This study inspired the publication of a book entitled, *The Neuropsychology of Self Discipline* by a colleague, Steve DeVore.

As I explored each of these 6 steps of self-discipline,<sup>3</sup> I saw that each facet is so valuable that if just one is missing, then student retention and success rates plummet.

An omission of one can affect personal health, relationships, income, job satisfaction and overall happiness.

I believe that college is an important bridge.

Awareness of the 6 steps {which represent quality actions in creating confidence, organization, planning and preparation for long-term, mature goals} is invaluable as a person begins a college career.

Here are the 6 steps along with the single qualifying factor\* which embraces all 6 steps.

1. Defined Purpose
2. Models of Possibility
3. Sensory Vision
4. Planning
5. Learning
6. Persistence

\*Passion, energy, desire demonstrates the Fire Within

1. **Defined Purpose** -from an instructor's point of view.

Today's society has been set up to reward multi-tasking, doing and having more and more and oh, yes, by the way, please do it even more quickly.

For example, look at the ad on TV promoting the use of credit cards. We see long lines cueing and flowing smoothly and quickly toward a cash register. Everyone is paying by credit card. Then the line abruptly stops for someone who chooses to write a check. The music stops. The people in line look annoyed and the person writing the check becomes embarrassed.

Peer pressure and advertising generate significant influences on our sense of timing and our use of time. Many students have grown up in this paradigm and will need some help in understanding and expanding on other uses of time.

The stats<sup>1</sup> revealing Native Americans' success in college is lower. Perhaps their culture and tendency to take life slower and more simply is reflected here.

As instructors working under the auspices of an institution of higher learning, we have a developing sense of purpose. Our understanding and expansion of our own use of time is still under construction.

The longer we teach, the more opportunities we have to re-define our sense of time and timing. For in order to be a good teacher, each also needs to continue being a student. With increasing knowledge and insight, a teacher can become a better role model. This leads into step number 2.

## **2. Models of Possibility**

Once a person has established a goal, it behooves him to find someone who has achieved a similar goal. Whether you observe that person from a distance via internet research, from an autobiography or face-to-face mentoring, a role model provides invaluable support.

- First you will perceive that “YES! It can be done!”
- Secondly, perhaps there is a blueprint you can use on your own path
- Thirdly, hope defines the possibility of personal success
- Fourth, even if your role model has a different career, you can view and emulate the rules of engagement that worked for him and apply them freely.

Therefore once you have defined a purpose, career, a plan or project, find a role model who will open up a sense of unlimited possibilities of successful steps for you to follow.

## **3. Sensory vision**

If you have ever watched the movie, *“The Secret”*,<sup>4</sup> perhaps you can recall seeing a man explain to his son about his vision boards. This aspect of the model of motivation is often overlooked or omitted altogether.

To make a creative visualization board, you can draw, cut and paste images or words that colorfully represent some piece of your plan of action, your defined purpose and the results you are aiming for. These are laid out and pasted onto a large colorful poster.

When completed, hang it someplace where you will see it several times a day.

At least once a day pause and look at it carefully. Visually and emotionally review the pictures and symbols that you choose to represent the successful achievement of your desired timing and specific use of your precious time.

Rekindle the enthusiasm and passion about this goal. This fire must be fanned regularly because the passion within generated the plan and will also keep you on track. By doing this daily you will charge every cell of your being with a forward thrusting emotion inoculating you with a “can-do, must-do, will-do” energy!

This self motivation sets the stage for the next step which is creating the plan.

I have taught this as a public workshop several times for adults in business.

#### **4. Making the Plan**

By now the research is well under way and momentum is established. Specific individual tasks become evident and are written down in a tentative order of completion.

As you look from Point A of origin to Point B of completion, you will begin to identify various stages that need to be developed, organized and tied together in proper order. You will generate a time line with a deadline. (Time & timing)

I have found that most will establish a time line using the best case scenario. Isn't it realistic to plan extra time for contingencies? There will be bad weather, stops and starts, family emergencies, illness, rewrites and other unforeseen obstacles. That is life whether you are in college or on the job. Any and all of these happen frequently enough that a mature person needs to incorporate extra time when making a plan.

I suggest on the first day of class, that my students double their estimate of time that it will take them to complete their essay – which is due on the last day of class. With this encouragement, I have never had a student ask for an extension or turn a paper in late. (Time)

More complex projects require additional time. Working with an unreasonable time line causes stress and can result in mistakes. At some point, a person may succumb to the overwhelming pressure; resort back to the thought “Maybe I can't do this” and in effect sabotage the model of self-discipline for success.

When a student becomes time pressured, look at some of the common consequences.

- Giving up and withdrawing
- Becoming overwhelmed
- Feeling depressed and diminished confidence
- Laziness or the opposite – obsession i.e. staying up all night
- Cheating or plagiarism<sup>5</sup>
- Using undesirable short cuts like drugs

None of these is a quality remedy to compensate for poor planning or time management.

#### **5. Learning**

Self awareness is critical in designing a custom blueprint or plan of action that will actually work. Short cuts rarely reap quality results.

Therefore a realistic assessment of strengths, weaknesses, potentials and resources is critical for this phase of preventing drop outs.

Research into the pre-requisites and program requirements must be done calibrated with an eye on the results of this personal assessment.

For example, if a student graduated from high school but did not have sufficient computer proficiency or English language skills, then it would seem obvious that this student needs to take courses as a precursor to enrolling in a demanding full time schedule. If he is allowed to enroll full time while he has upgraded his computer and language tools, he is at a higher risk of any of the above listed consequences of feeling time pressured. Indeed I would say he will feel the pressure as a result of poor timing.

In any game plan, the time line should include time to complete a basic pre-requisite class so that adequate proficiency skills can be added to the “can-do, will-do” attitude. Goals, broken down into smaller objectives, will build confidence and enthusiasm when done well. (Timing)

*“The pressure of too much to do and too little time is the biggest issue for many full-time students. We have no choice in the amount of information we must learn in a relatively short period of time. It is a big pressure. I hope I can handle it.”* (This is a paraphrased comment from a 1<sup>st</sup> year SJC nursing student whom I interviewed.)

Preferably at each stage of the model of motivation process, a person will proceed to the next step only after he can (with confidence) see that that stage is done well. Psychologically as you progress to the desired outcome, your step-by-step enthusiasm and satisfaction will present you with this final factor.

## **6. Persistence and Perseverance**

Staying on task within the scope of your charted course is one of the hardest parts for many.

If you know this is your tendency then consider creating or joining a study/buddy group where you will be accountable to someone. By announcing your intentions to a friend, family member or colleague, you can establish deadlines and peer pressure to shore up your accountability. This process is important to maintain a balanced momentum.

The longer or more difficult the course or project, the more attention you will need to focus on in order to be persistent and successfully complete your goals in a timely fashion.

Perhaps giving interim rewards is a solution for some teachers. This might work best especially in the longer programs of study.

Don't forget the magic ingredients that stimulate success at each of these 6 steps –

Passion,  
Enthusiasm,  
Rekindle that inner drive and  
Re-commit to get it done well.

If you decide to use this 6 step formula in your classroom, I would suggest that you begin with a small, short term project. See if it works and helps you to assess timing and your best use of time with and for your students.

Then challenge yourself to use it for the more difficult and long-term tasks. The more that you use it, the more likely you will find your natural rhythm and sense of timing. This discovery will expand your self-knowledge and confidence for other life goals.

In the book, *The Road Less Traveled*<sup>6</sup>, the author writes, “*Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life’s problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing. With only some discipline we can solve only some problems. With total discipline we can solve all problems.*”

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In addition to serving as a SJC adjunct instructor, I have taught in several venues, including a substitute teacher for local grades 1-6. I have become aware of some of the educational pitfalls that affect a student’s foundation for higher education and adulthood.

**1.** State funding is insufficient to cover the basic education needs. I have worked with licensed teachers, E.A.s, (Educational Assistants) and other support staff.

One of the issues frequently discussed is low pay and increased work load. I personally know teachers who work 10 -12 hours a day and are paid for 8, they are very determined and committed but even these altruistic instructors are burning out. Their general reported attitude is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, lazy and ready to quit. Sound familiar? These individuals are the role models of many of the students coming to SJC. (Time)

**2.** Many of the grade school classes must be micro-managed for attitude, behavioral discipline, and for encouraging focused attention on the task at hand. This type of intensive hand-holding is very time consuming and stressful. I could see this just by observing the faces of the students and the staff. Perhaps the Stanford Marshmallow Study on Goal Setting and Success<sup>3</sup> could be introduced to all first graders. (Time)

In brief, this Stanford study was begun in the 1960’s with a group of 400 four year olds. The children were offered a marshmallow but immediately were told that if they could wait for the experimenter to return after running an errand, they would receive two marshmallows.

Those who could wait the 15 minutes for the experimenter to return would be demonstrating the ability to delay gratification and control impulse.

About 1/3 of the students grabbed the single marshmallow right away.

Another 1/3 was able to wait only a few minutes.

The final 1/3 of the test group waited until the experimenter returned.

The researchers followed the group of 400 throughout their school years and into early adult life.

Here is what they found.

The children in the group who waited the longest were more socially competent, personally effective, self-assertive, and better able to cope with the frustrations of life.

They were less likely to go to pieces, freeze, regress under stress or become rattled and disorganized when under pressure.

They embraced challenges, and pursued them instead of giving up even in the face of difficulties.

They were more self-reliant and confident, trustworthy and dependable. They took initiative and plunged into projects.

More than a decade later, they could still delay gratification in the pursuit of their goals. Wow!

According to the parents' evaluations, the children who waited 15 minutes were academically superior, could better put their ideas into words, use and respond to reason, could concentrate better, make plans and follow through on them and were more eager to learn.

It gets better yet...

In fact the kids who could wait just 15 minutes, scored, on average, 210 points better on their SAT's than the instant gratification group.

My suggestion is to get this study into the hands of every kindergarten and first grade teachers in the entire state! And a bag of marshmallow costs less than \$3.00!

May I be so bold to predict that the generational return on a "marshmallow investment" is nothing short of higher enrollment, better retention, increased income, lower crime and a more evolved mature community? This is a more efficient return on the dollar and our time.

3. Smaller classes or a higher student – teacher ratio would provide more quality time for 1 to 1 instruction.

4. Continued use of programs like Brain Gym<sup>7</sup> (aka Educational Kinesiology) would be an efficient use of students' and teachers' time.

Here is an excerpt from a Bloomfield family that has benefited greatly from incorporating Brain Gym with homework.

***My grandson, Michael is a 13 year old boy, who has had a very hard time learning to read. For whatever reason he has not had the desire to learn or maybe it frustrated him so he didn't want to try.***

***When his mother and I learned about Brain Gym we knew we had to try it.***

***Mark didn't want to do it at first, and then he went more willingly.***

***We noticed some improvement at school.***

*I still thought the teachers were tired of trying to help him and were just padding him on. That is, until recently he read to me a report he was working on and he was reading very well! When I commented to him on how well he was reading he thanked me for sending him to Brain Gym class.*

*Signed,  
Irene M.  
Michael's grandmother*

In doing short easy exercise and postures everyone can learn, recall, and test in a more balanced space. Ultimately this saves time – a critical factor with present full schedules.

It is my intention to take a little time and incorporate some Brain gym in with some of my upcoming classes. It helps everyone, regardless of age, to work at his potential thereby relieving much anxiety, procrastination tendencies, plagiarism, cheating vs. failing and inclination to drop out. The grammar school teachers I spoke with had a similar list of caveats to watch for in their kids-at-risk lists.

5. In Karen Duncan's 1<sup>st</sup> year nursing class, I observed the benefits of her leading the class in a 3-minute meditation. It appeared to be time well spent. It helped the students relax after a 2-hour exam and before a lecture. Since I teach a course on meditation it was rewarding for me to witness the benefits first hand.

Thus participating as a role model, the instructor also fulfilled her own needs for relaxation, learning and persistence. She also used comic strips and laughter to diffuse the stress.

With the use of these short re-balancing tools, an instructor can partner with students. (The key word is partner.) This is a mature transition from the micro-managing stress filled teaching I commonly saw in the public schools. It is not reasonable to expect a child to grow up all of a sudden and act like a well prepared adult as he begins college when the foundational structure has a few elements missing.

As instructors on campus we can use some of these techniques to jump start some students and help them to raise the bar. In other situations, other remedial measures can be shared with local schools, parents and communities. If some of these are done early in the course (timing) perhaps the student will be more efficient and wiser in his time management. (Time)

### Summary

I agree with some of the information that I read in the LaGuardia Community College chapter entitled a "Window on the World."<sup>8</sup>

I spoke with a number of instructors and students throughout this research time. In summary here are some thoughts and behaviors (in order of frequency mentioned) which seem to promote **drop outs** here at San Juan College as well as in public school.

- Family & personal crisis that overwhelm and take time away from class & studies
- Too much to do in too little time – class load is too demanding & unexpected
- Financial stress
- Time it takes to commute just for classes
- Not enough time to play and relax with friends and family each week
- Lack of confidence in multi-tasking to address all of life's demands

Here are some suggestions to improve student retention at the collegiate level.

- Be more realistic in creating individual schedules
- Offer better time management classes as a prerequisite to some full-time enrollees.
- Teach relaxation techniques that can help diffuse stressors before a person reaches overwhelm “sate” of mind
- Be the teacher who stays on the job. Use the 6 steps of self discipline personally. Teach by example.
- Learn to focus on just one task at a time. Slow down. Do it well. Doing it right the first time saves time, frustration and discouragement.
- **Quality versus quantity is an excellent measure of success in education.**

It is truly important that we step away from the statistics and stereotypes in community college life. Each locale is unique and each person and new year presents new dynamics to assess and work with.

As teachers we need to be aware of the people we are invited to teach.

We need to create a fair balance of pre-requisite requirements, remedial efforts and the amount of time that we can allot to these tasks. Slow down and assess. Don't move so quickly that students continue to fall through the cracks and drop out. Relax and take more time to listen to the needs of the students and to your own.

Instructors need to remain passionately dedicated with a clear sense of purpose. The pride and mature flexibility that we bring to the classroom grow our efforts in prospering a healthy community for future generations.

In my opinion these are the meaningful long-term blessings of deliberately using our time well. Then we may facilitate a higher percentage of students graduating rather than dropping out. What a satisfying conclusion!

Respectfully submitted,

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 SJC Adjunct Instructor  
 Natural Therapies Sampler, Meditation, Holistic Health &  
 Recording Personal & Family Histories

**Individual readings and research:**

1. NM Community Colleges: Performance-Based Indicators Prepared by Ron Jernigan dated 9/14/07
2. The Stanford Marshmallow Study by Michael Mishel found at [www.sybervision.com/Discipline/marshmallow.htm](http://www.sybervision.com/Discipline/marshmallow.htm)
3. Neurophysiology of Self-Discipline: Model of Motivation by Steve DeVore located at [www.sybervision.com/Discipline/six\\_steps.htm](http://www.sybervision.com/Discipline/six_steps.htm)
4. The Secret –DVD<sup>(tm)</sup> 2006 by Prime Time Productions
5. Plagiarism 10: Keys to Preventing Academic Misconduct by Dennis E. Gregory, Ed.D.
6. The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck
7. Brain Gym: Teacher's Edition by Paul E. Dennison & Gail E. Dennison
8. LaGuardia Community College A Window on the World by Betsy O. Barefoot & Michael J. Siegel

**Observations:**

- A. Irene McDaniel –art teacher grades 1-3, Central Primary, Bloomfield, Feb 11, 2008
- B. Rebecca Chatham - teacher grade 3, Central Primary, Bloomfield, April 7, 2008
- C. Encore planning meeting, SJC April 1, 2008
- D. Christine Wood's English class, SJC April 3, 2008
- E. Karen Duncan's 1<sup>st</sup> year Nursing class, SJC April 13, 2008
- F. Interview Brain Gym parent Bloomfield, April 18, 2008
- G. Letter from a 5<sup>th</sup> grader's grandmother regarding Brain Gym April 2008