CHAPTER FOUR: RETENTION

I. Retention

Brooklyn College has consistently pursued the objective of enlarging educational opportunities for students. Since October of 1995 the Dean of Undergraduate Studies has convened a Committee on Retention (directors of the Freshman Year Program, Honors Program, Division of Student Life, and various counseling services) that meets monthly to discuss current problems as well as future solutions and initiatives. Happily, many new programs and procedures coming out of earlier self-studies and from this Retention Committee have begun to benefit both Brooklyn College students and the fiscal situation of the college. These programs and initiatives are described and evaluated below.

A. Pre-Freshman Summer Institute The Pre-Freshman Summer Institute Program has consisted of the summer programs run by the Math, English, and DES/SEEK departments, designed to get entering students failing one or more CUNY assessment tests to pass these tests and to enter the mainstream undergraduate program before their matriculation commences in the Fall semester. The Summer Institute has been in operation since the 1986 pilot "Pre-Freshman Summer Immersion Program," and has more than tripled in size over the past decade. In Summer 1997 it accommodated approximately 800 students, as data from the Undergraduate Dean's Office indicate (see Figure 1); in comparison to the previous summer there was a significant increase in enrollment. The data in Figure 1 indicate that more than half of the students entering the college or continuing with remedial status in the Fall of 1997 came through the Summer Institute Program.

![Figure 1: Enrollment of pre-Freshman Students in the College’s Summer Institute Program for 1996 and 1997.]

In Summer 1998 there were over 900 students in the program.

The success of the college's Summer Institute Program can be evaluated in terms of the number of pre-Freshman students who pass re-tests of the CUNY assessment tests conducted at the end of the summer program, but before the Fall semester begins. Figure 2, which shows the
relevant Dean's Office data, indicates that overall the Summer programs make a significant contribution in getting students past these testing hurdles and into the mainstream as early as possible. The importance of this result to retention and eventual graduation cannot be underestimated. The lower pass rates for SEEK students undoubtedly reflect the fact that severe underpreparedness can result from economic and academic deprivation.

Figure 2: Percent pass rates on CUNY Assessment retests for 1997 pre-Freshman students

In Summer 1998, 209 pre-Freshman students participated in the program: 87% of the native speakers of English passed the writing assessment test as did 71% of the ESL students; 92% of the native speakers passed the reading assessment test as did 70% of the ESL students; 100% of those who took the mathematics program passed the mathematics assessment test.

Another way to look at the importance of the Summer Institutes is to consider whether they have also helped pre-Freshman students who did not pass retests of the CUNY placement tests. Data for such students, calculated from information provided by the Dean's Office, is shown in Figure 3. The data plotted in Figure 3 are based on the total number of students in each of the two cohorts (SEEK and non-SEEK) who did not pass the retests held at the end of the Summer Program and prior to the Fall 1997 term. The data show how many students in this category advanced to the next highest remediation level. Such students enrolled in the relevant higher level remedial course rather than in the lower level course in which they would have enrolled without the advantage gained from the Summer Program.

Figure 3: Percent remedial advance rates of 1997 pre-Freshman students who did not pass the CUNY assessment retest.
It is clear from these observations that the Summer Institute Program has been a valuable means of assisting the progress of students entering Brooklyn College. The Summer Program is the basis upon which a streamlined pre-enrollment remediation program is being built.

B. Freshman Year College

The Freshman Year College was inaugurated in Fall 1995 to provide a coordinated institutional response to the challenges of the freshman year. The program is designed to provide the freshman class with extensive advisement and other forms of support. Its aim is to insure a smooth transition to the college environment and, in so doing, to help enhance retention of students in the critical first year. The Freshman Year College consists of several components: 1) a pre-enrollment summer program; 2) comprehensive advisement; and 3) block programming.

1. Summer Program: Freshman Year College begins in the summer with accelerated academic programs for well prepared and underprepared students. Several regular courses are offered in the summer session to entering mainstream freshmen, and to freshmen enrolled in the Summer Institute program described above. These include courses in Art History (Core 2.1), Classics (Core 1), Math and Computer Science (Core 5), and Speech. Student polls taken at the conclusion of the 1997 summer program indicated that students believed the program to be of great value in improving skills and readiness for college level work. Ninety-three per cent (93%) of those polled gave the program a positive rating, and 78% put it in the top two categories.

2. Advisement: In Freshman Year College, advisement begins with high school outreach designed to facilitate transition to college life. This is followed by comprehensive, ongoing student orientation, and an advisement program implemented by student/faculty teams begins prior to the first semester registration and continues through the end of the freshman year.

3. Block Programming: Block Programming is a hallmark of Freshmen Year College. It forms a cornerstone of the college’s efforts to improve retention. Block programming for freshmen, which began in 1995, is an outgrowth of a block scheduling program for summer remediation students dating from the early 1990s. Entering freshman are assigned to blocks of first year courses through which they proceed as a coherent group. All students enrolled in a block take the same sections at the same time, and remain together as partners in learning for their entire first semester. This program has several important attributes that regular, "unblocked" scheduling cannot match in terms of fostering retention:

- students sharing classes form mutual support groups and are less likely to feel lost and uncared for in the sprawl of a large urban college;
- students are assured of taking courses appropriate to their level;
- tutoring and advisement can be more readily focused;
• a framework for interaction and cooperation among program faculty is created that leads to the presentation of mutually supportive themes in courses that outside the block format are usually taught in veritable isolation.

The block program began with 190 freshman in 1995, expanded to 237 students in 1996, and expanded again in 1997. Its success in improving retention is impressive. Table 1 shows statistics from the Office of the Undergraduate Dean on retention and performance of block students as compared to regular freshman. A 1996 study of Core Curriculum and introductory course grades, discussed more fully in the section on Students, shows a 91% completion rate for block freshman in Core courses, the highest rate for any Core or introductory course in the study. It is evident from these data that Freshman Year block programming has had a significant impact not only on retention, but on the academic performance of block programmed students as well.

**TABLE 1**: Retention and performance of block and regular freshmen entering the college in 1995

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Block Freshman</th>
<th>Regular Freshmen</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Retention after 4 semesters</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Cumulative GPA</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average credits attempted</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average credits earned</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>44</td>
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4. **Faculty Development**: A key to the success of Freshman Year College is that it provides an opportunity for faculty to re-examine and re-think the content and presentation of required courses in light of the special needs of freshman students and of the interdisciplinary and interactive nature of block programming. The college has adopted several successful strategies for promoting faculty collaboration and dialogue. These include, most notably, the program called "Transformations" and the creation of a Center for Teaching, both of which are discussed more fully in the next chapter, on Faculty.

5. **Academic Progress Alert**: This is an "early warning program" run by the Office of the Undergraduate Dean, which attempts to identify early in the semester students at high-risk of failing. It relies to a great extent on the cooperation of faculty who provide information about students in their courses who are in danger of failing. Such students are sent letters encouraging them to meet with their professors to discuss the situation. Sometimes counseling is advised.
6. No-Fault Freshman Year: Brooklyn College follows a policy that no freshman is dismissed from the college on the sole basis of poor academic performance before completing two semesters in attendance and receiving at least one warning. When a new student's academic record falls below the college's standards, the student is required to see a counselor in the Academic Advisement Center prior to registering for the subsequent semester. The counselor assists the student in assessing his/her academic problems and in assembling a plan to remedy the situation. The effect of this policy is difficult to assess quantitatively, but presumably it aids retention because academically sound students who have temporary difficulty adjusting to college life are not prematurely dismissed.

7. Other retention factors: The Learning Center has added to the quality and quantity of advisement and learning opportunities available to students, and provides a center for peer counseling programs. The opening of classes on the weekend has encouraged students both to begin and to continue at Brooklyn College. The improved technologies that have enabled phone registration, better and more quickly available records, and information kiosks are also presumed to have increased student satisfaction and retention.

II. Improvement of Retention

Although retention at the college has greatly improved in recent years through highly successful programs such as Freshman Year College, "Transformations," and block programming, more can be done. This is particularly true in light of the new, more constraining era the university will soon enter. In preparing for such an eventuality the linkage between remediation and retention must be kept in view. New programs for enhancing remediation/retention will be needed that will help students continue toward graduation under more stringent constraints. Planning for the future is now underway by a variety of college units, particularly by the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the Dean's Retention Committee and by the remedial and basic skills programs that are likely to suffer the heaviest impact of no-remediation regulations. Several areas of concern present themselves. Many of these have already been discussed in dealing with specific remedial, basic skills, and retention programs. A few remaining issues are outlined briefly below.

A. Counseling and Advisement: The college has made great strides in improving its advisement and counseling services over the last decade. But the sophomore year often raises new issues for students which often complicate their forward progress. In addition, there are aspects of departmental advisement for majors that might be enhanced.

B. Counseling for the Sophomore Year: To a degree, it is not improper to assert that well advised freshmen are suddenly thrown to their own devices when they move on to the sophomore year. Such students have received little counseling that is aimed at getting them past the next hurdle successfully -- declaring a major. The college is developing an improved, efficient sophomore advisement program, recognizing the importance of getting students to think about, and to start, the major track well before reaching 60 credits, the point at which a major
must be declared. An Assistant Dean for Middle Student Programs was appointed in September 1998.

1. Major Preference Form A document has been created that will be sent to each student's prospective major department. This will help identify majors earlier and get prospective majors on the right track toward departmental prerequisites and advisement.

2. Career Opportunities Descriptions The Academic Advisement Center, the Learning Center, and other advisement and career counseling units should have a one page sheet from each department outlining careers to which its major programs can lead. The Office of Career Services has, in fact, prepared (in consultation with departments) and distributed an information sheet for most departments.

3. Major Workshops A workshop should be set up for students debating a choice of major. Such an event should be held at least once a year, perhaps under the guidance of the Learning Center or the Academic Advisement Center and would provide information and counseling to students who are undecided as to a choice of a major. Although informational workshops have occurred sporadically within departments in the past, a more coherent college-wide effort, coordinated by a single office, is needed to make such an effort most effective. Career Services ran such workshops in Spring 1998, and they were well attended. There is evidence, however, of the need for more publicizing of such an event.

C. Counseling by Departments Departments must of course take the major responsibility for advising their majors. One of the chief problems new majors have is that they often do not fully comprehend their major's requirements for graduation, its prerequisite structure, or its sequence of courses. They also may need guidance in planning a post-graduate career — whether to go to graduate school or directly into the job market, for example. To help majors with such problems, more departments should be encouraged to prepare program handbooks for their majors in "user-friendly" language. In addition, a computerized major requirement check-off form for each major, describing prerequisites, program choices, and other necessary information should be created. The checker currently being developed by the Registrar's Office, and slated for use late in 1998, is a valuable step in this direction.

In 1997 the Undergraduate Dean’s office initiated college-wide undergraduate advisement days during the first week of registration for continuing students. Departments are expected to hold expanded counseling hours during this period, including evening hours, and peer advisors are available at a central location to answer general questions about college requirements and to direct students to department offices for further information. Weekend students receive counseling through the Adult Degree Program office.

D. General Counseling Improvements The college also should move to strengthen other aspects of its undergraduate counseling efforts. Four obvious needs are listed below.
1. Peer Tutoring: Most importantly, the college should expand peer tutoring. Many of the remedial and basic skills programs are in dire need of additional peer tutoring support to sustain their mission. In addition, the programs of the Learning Center and other advisory units of the college would profit from additional peer tutoring support.

2. Unofficial Withdrawals: Many students become discouraged because they do not realize that the unofficial withdrawal grade (WU) turns into a failing grade (F) if they do not apply to withdraw officially. The college should perhaps warn in writing all students receiving such grades, and advise of alternatives to rectify the situation.

3. Early Warning Counseling: A counseling initiative that complements the early warning system for substandard academic performance should be created. This will have a profound effect on protecting students, particularly freshmen, from dismissal.

4. Intensive Counseling: More direct, intensive counseling, modeled on the "intrusive counseling" offered through the SEEK program, might be of benefit to a wider array of students, particularly those in danger of academic dismissal. Such a program should be handled through the Academic Advisement Center.

E. Internet Information: Information about departments and their majors has been put on the internet by some departments. Each department and program should have its own web page describing the programs and courses offered by the department, its faculty, facilities, student body, activities, and other items of interest. These web pages should be created by department personnel, and updated periodically. Departmental web pages should be attached to the Brooklyn College web page so that students interested in a department, perhaps as a prospective major, can readily gain access to information about it. A separate web page for one page career opportunities descriptions of all departments has been created. Students should be instructed on how to access department internet information, perhaps as part of their Freshman orientation. At least one faculty member in each department should be designated to maintain the departmental web page, and be trained by the college on how to accomplish this.

F. Academic Honors: Increasing publicity about students receiving academic honors and awards (e.g., being named to the Dean's List, receiving department honors, etc.) might prove of benefit. Such a move will make recipients feel good about themselves and serve general notice to others that the college values high performance. Information on awards and honors has been put on the Brooklyn College web site and into the information kiosks.

G. Faculty Counseling: Many problems of retention would be solved if students read the College Bulletin and student handbook, but unfortunately they do not. Retention might be enhanced if faculty took on greater responsibility for counseling. One problem here is that faculty are often no more cognizant of rules, regulations, and requirements than the students they see in their classes. A Faculty Handbook has been assembled by a faculty committee, under the direction of the Assistant Provost, that provides information useful for advising students. The
Deans of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies regularly and repeatedly remind faculty of various deadlines and requirements for registration and course syllabi.