

# UNIVERSITY RECRUITMENT, FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE AND STUDENT RETENTION: THE KEY TO FUTURE SUCCESS

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**Abstract:** In order to stop the “brain drain,” Binghamton University must recruit and retain the kinds of students that are most likely to stay in the area after graduation. Many college graduates stay in their college town or city because of personal ties made during college. These ties can be made through community service and civic engagement during college years. At Binghamton University, there are programs in place that aim to connect the community with the campus.

*Keywords:* Student Retention, Student Recruitment, Freshmen Orientation, Civic Engagement, First Year Experience, Community Service, Living-Learning Communities

*Binghamton Keywords:* Enrollment Marketing, Leadership and Community Service Practicum, Office of Campus Life, Living-Learning Communities, First Year Experience Courses

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## PART I: INTRODUCTION

### I. Recognizing the Brain Drain and Discovering Successful Students

Binghamton University is a very selective school with a talented student population. There are 2,400 freshmen selected from over 30,000 applicants. These students remain at Binghamton University to gain a high-quality education. However, the Binghamton area does not retain these successful students. After graduation, most students leave, creating a “brain drain” which is one of the leading factors in the decrease of the younger population. Binghamton University’s efforts to assimilate students into the off-campus community are very important in the role of retention of talent. Once students are comfortable off campus they will be more likely to stay in the area after graduation. This talent can be harnessed to improve all aspects of life in the Southern Tier.

### II. Recruitment and Defining Successful Characteristics of Students

Firstly, college must recruit students who are sure to do well and who will remain enrolled in the university. High achieving students who already have a commitment to community service as well as students with an entrepreneurial spirit are highly desirable. Students with these qualities are more likely to become involved with the off-campus

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community and make personal ties and affiliations. Entrepreneurial students will take advantage of the many empty storefronts and use their creativity and knowledge gained at Binghamton University to open businesses in the area.

Community service, as defined by Professor Hellman, Professor Hoppes, and Professor Ellison in their article "Factors Associated with College Student Intent to Engage in Community Service," is defined as "the voluntary prosocial set of behaviors aimed at the improvement of communities and the quality of life for members of those communities." University-based community serviced activities include benefits of service learning for students and faculty, "resulting in enhanced critical reasoning, personal and interpersonal development, understanding and application of core knowledge, reflective practice, and citizenship for the student, and solutions to real problems for the community." By engaging students in community service, students and the surrounding community benefit.

There is a link between attitudes and behaviors, which is evident in the theory that the stronger the individual's intentions, the more likely they will perform an intended behavior. A strong correlation is apparent between the intent to engage in community service and the following factors: a sense of connectedness with the community, the seriousness of community need, action, the moral obligation of norms, and one's perceived ability to be effective. Universities that promote these factors will have more students participating in community service. Community service leads to a student's sense of belonging and personal ties within the community. Those with ties to the community and those who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to stay in an area. It can therefore be concluded that students who participate in the Binghamton community will be more likely to stay in Binghamton and stop the brain drain.

There are ways to foster a student's level of connectedness to their community. In the Hellman, Hoppes, and Ellisons article, they quote Jones and Hill who said, "When someone helped students make sense of why they were doing what they were doing, it was more meaningful to them and the commitments deepened (2003)." Similarly, Gugerty and Swezey offer the theory that, "It is incumbent on each college and university to learn about the community in which it resides or with which it intends to develop a relationship (1996)." Hellman, Hoppes and Ellison say that this appreciation will "lay the groundwork for connection and collaboration in true partnerships, which transform[s] academic engagement from a responsible action to a moral obligation." Students who are involved through university and community partnerships will soon grow from a feeling of responsibility to a sense of a moral obligation towards the wellbeing of the community.

Dr. Cindy Veenstra stresses the need for student support services in her article entitled "A Strategy for Improving Freshmen College Retention." At the end of freshmen year, a student has four choices, which consist of returning to the college, transferring to another college within the university, transferring to another university, and dropping out of college. Dr. Veenstra states that the first two decisions do not result in a net loss for the college, while the last two cause the university to lose its investment in the student. The final option, dropping out of college, also results in a loss for society. A lost student is not simply a monetary loss, they are a loss of diversity as well; the student who stays adds "diversity of ideas or more engagement in his/her classrooms. Each individual student brings a different set of attributes to the

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university...and can be valuable." In order for students to fully experience what the community has to offer, there must be programs that will enable students to be successful in college and to remain enrolled. Dr. Veenstra has found that identifying at-risk students is one way to improve retention rates.

There are certain characteristics that affect retention. These pre-college characteristics can be determined and measured and certain processes can be put in place to affect student retention. For example, family support can be measured by the parent's level of education, and if there is a lower level of parental education, the student may drop out, which leads to a loss for the university. Dr. Veenstra recommends the process change of encouraging parents to support their child, and an online network for parents to further their support in order to encourage students to persist. Another important factor includes the students' level of social engagement, which can be measured by a survey indicator of social engagement in high school. Students with a low level of social engagement in college may be "over-challenged in courses that stress team work." Dr. Veenstra recommends "extra guidance on participating in dorm activities and small club activities." Also, the student's commitment to the university is equally important, especially for students who are attending a lower-ranked university, as students may be attending their second or third choice university. It is important to establish a peer community in order for students to persist.

Entrepreneurial students must also be targeted as candidates for acceptance to universities because these are the kinds of students more likely to create social networks and to create new businesses in the area. Entrepreneurial students can be distinguished from their peers through seven character traits described by Professor David Kirby in his article entitled "Entrepreneurship education: Can Business Schools Meet the Challenge?" Entrepreneurs have risk-taking ability, a need for achievement, a high internal locus of control, a desire for autonomy, deviancy from expected norms, creativity and opportunism, and a high degree of intuition. Professor Kirby has found that traits of Entrepreneurship can be learned, which means that schools should provide classes that teach entrepreneurship, as education plays a huge role in creating entrepreneurs and fostering their growth.

Professor Kirby states that there are three main reasons for entrepreneurship:

- 1) job creation and economic development
- 2) strategic adjustment/realignment
- 3) deregulation and privatization of public utilities & state-owned enterprises

Entrepreneur classes must teach students skills in communication, especially persuasion, creativity, critical thinking and assessment, leadership, negotiation, problem-solving, social networking and time management. Business owners also must have knowledge enabling them to create a successful business plan, regarding "debt... financing... legal and tax issues, intellectual property, [and] franchising." Colleges and universities offer classes and programs on campus to teach entrepreneurial skills as well as offer community service options in order to attract individuals who are entrepreneurial and community service-minded.

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## **III. Orientation**

Once students are recruited to the university, they undergo an orientation process that introduces them to campus as well as some of the many resources and fun activities that are available. The orientation process at Binghamton University is usually a two-day event, in which incoming students learn about life on campus and have time to meet each other. In order to foster university/community relations, an important possibility is to include off-campus exposure during orientation. Already, efforts have been made to bring students downtown as soon as possible after orientation. One successful effort is the Binghamton Blowout Block Party, or B3P, held in 2008, which was a street fair with events for community members as well as students. The B3P was a creation of the Binghamton University Catalysts for Intellectual Capital 2020 with a vision to connect people on and off campus. It will now be called the Communiversity Fest, to take place under the direction of Southern Tier Celebrates! in September 2009.

It is unclear whether orientations do affect student retention, but in Professor Perrine and Professor Spain's article titled "Impact of a Pre-Semester College Orientation Program: Hidden Benefits?" they measured the helpfulness of activities during orientation. The most helpful, of course, was determined to be free food, with a rating of 4.04 out of 5 (2008). Other activities perceived to be helpful included tips for academic and college success, evening activities, and motivational speakers. They found that in general, "students perceive various types of orientation programs as useful with regards to their acclimation to college" Perrine and Spain mention the research of Professor Tinto, who believes that students' perception of useful orientations should translate to increased college retention. Orientation sessions lead to a smoother acclimation and therefore students will be more likely to become involved, and this increased involvement will increase retention.

## **IV. Freshmen Seminars and Living Learning Communities**

After the orientation process at Binghamton University, freshmen have the option to take a class that helps them adjust to college life. There are numerous ways to make freshmen feel that Binghamton University is their home away from home. One successful way found to help freshmen adjust is to offer living-learning communities, in which students take linked courses and live with students in their classes. Another way is to offer classes geared towards the interests and needs of freshmen.

In "Unmasking the Effects of Student Engagement on First-Year College Grades and Persistence," researchers found that about half of students enrolled in four-year institutions completed bachelor's degrees within six years at the institutions they started, with this rate being lower for "historically undeserved" students. It was determined that a higher level of student engagement is necessary for student retention. There are three measures of student engagement: time spent studying, time spent in co-curricular activities, and a global measure of other engagement in educational practices. The authors have found that students involved in universities with programs such as: implemented orientation, placement testing, first-year seminars, learning communities, intrusive advising, early warning systems, redundant safety nets, supplemental instruction, peer tutoring and mentoring, theme-based campus housing,

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adequate financial aid including on-campus work, internships, service learning, and demonstrably effective teaching practices (2008) are more likely to be satisfied with their experience, and to persist and graduate. Yet these must also be customized for individualized needs and be of high quality.

In the article, "Taking Student Retention Seriously," Professor Vincent Tinto names the five conditions that increase retention, which should be present in all efforts to retain students on campus. These include: expectation, as students with high expectations upon them will rise to the challenge; advice, as students need clear and consistent information about the institution as well as help with future plans; support, as students will persist if they are supported in their endeavors; involvement, as students who feel like they are an integral part of the university will persist; and learning, as students who learn are students who stay in college.

Professor Tinto recommends living-learning communities as one way to incorporate all five conditions for student retention. Living-learning communities are described as a "co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together... [they] will link students by linking courses... [or by] sharing the entire first-semester curriculum so that students in the learning community study the same material throughout the semester (2002)." These linked courses are typically "connected by an organizing theme that gives meaning to their linkage... to engender a coherent interdisciplinary or cross subject learning [not attainable] in unrelated stand-alone courses." Professor Tinto says that faculty will then alter their teaching methods in order to promote a shared and collaborative learning environment and foster student retention.

## **PART II: BEST PRACTICES**

### **I. Marketing to Students**

Binghamton University is very selective, with an acceptance rate projected for 2009 of around 30%. This year, there were over 30,000 applications for 2,150 spots in the freshmen class. Although official statistics are not available, over 9,000 will be accepted.

Cheryl Fabrizi, the Director of Enrollment Marketing Management at Binghamton University said that currently, Admissions does not try to market to any particular type of student. Mrs. Fabrizi outlined the four main lines of communication streams that market to students. These streams are emails sent to four different kinds of students: prospective students, which includes names from College Board and the ACT company and students who have inquired about Binghamton University through email; students who have already applied; and students that have been accepted/admitted, which consists of more specified messages towards students in a certain demographic or have shown interest in a certain professional school or major within Binghamton University.

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## CLASS PROFILE FOR FRESHMEN AT BINGHAMTON

*Projected Fall 2009*

<b>Undergraduate Students:</b>	11,515
<b>Graduate Students:</b>	2,920
<b>Total Applications:</b>	30,305
<b>Number of Accepted Students:</b>	~ 9,500
<b>Freshmen Enrolled:</b>	2,400
<b>Acceptance Rate (# Accepted/ # Applications):</b>	~ 30%
<b>Enrollment Rate of Accepted Students:</b>	25.3%
<b>Enrollment Rate of All Applicants:</b>	7.9%
<b>Freshmen Retention Rate:</b>	91% (National Avg: 68%)

The fourth category is the most specified, and these are students in the process of enrollment. This final category of students receives emails informing them of deadlines regarding deposits, health forms, housing. Admissions' marketing sends 13 different email communications, which they call B-mail, to these students. They have also set up a micro-website which helps already accepted students learn the next step in the enrollment process. The website also provides a way for students to stay connected throughout the summer. Mrs. Fabrizi said it is "not a win" until students arrive and attend classes. Therefore, the admissions department must make sure to keep in touch with students throughout the summer to ensure they will arrive in the fall.

## II. Orientation and the Transition to College

Marinda Souva, the assistant director of New Student Programs, explains that the orientation process begins when freshmen receive their acceptance letter and lasts until the end of freshmen year. This implies that students are still in transition during their second semester. However, the most important times in a new student's college career are the first six weeks of freshmen year. This is when students make their impression of their new surroundings and decide whether to remain enrolled or to transfer. The Campus Life office works closely with admissions and other offices to make sure that incoming students receive consistent messages throughout their transition period, to make their transition easier during those first weeks.

Overall, the orientation program tries to make sure students understand that they are part of the community as a whole. Yet the Office of Campus Life recognizes that there is a hierarchy of student concern that needs to be addressed accordingly. The first are basic needs that must be met, for example, how to register for class, learning about dorm life, and where to eat. The next issue that the orientation program seeks to address is how new students are part of Binghamton University and the last task is to teach each new student that they are a part of the Greater Binghamton community.

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At the summer orientation program, the main focus is the academic aspect of college. Mrs. Souva has found that in general, Binghamton University students take more initiative than their peers but still take longer to acclimate socially than academically. The orientation process makes sure that the academic transition goes smoothly so students can quickly move to transition socially. Although the transition regarding academics is easier for most students, academic life is the foundation that the Office of Campus Life recognizes as important for the orientation process. During the summer orientation, students register for classes and meet with department faculty to discuss possible courses of study. This connection between faculty and students is important for new student's comfort during the first semesters of college. Since students make their own schedules for the first semester, it helps them learn how to register for classes for future semesters.

The orientation session does not include trips off-campus for new students; however family members had the option last year to take a bus downtown and have a tour of Binghamton. Mrs. Souva believes that this tour alleviates parents' fears of the city of Binghamton and the bus system, and once parents learn that it is not difficult to get downtown, they will share their knowledge with their children. However, Human Development students are given a tour of the University Downtown Center and the downtown area since their courses are in a separate building downtown. They also have implemented a trolley tour of community service organizations downtown in the past but were not able to do so this year due to time constraints regarding schedules.

Binghamton University's Old Union sets up a Hospitality Center with displays from student groups and highlights the community. Students and parents can browse through the displays and talk to current students about clubs and off-campus life. Students can also learn about how to get off campus from their Orientation Advisor, who is taught how to read the bus schedules and is able to answer questions about the buses. At the end of orientation, students are given a bag filled with brochures and information about local businesses to take home and look through before they arrive for classes.

During Welcome Back Weekend, there is a University Fest, which is an event for students to learn about student organizations. Community organizations and businesses are able to have a table at this event for a vendor fee. Since community members are invited and many do attend, there is a tent set up for kids with games. To advertize for University Fest, Campus Life puts ads in the paper and contacts local radios. This event is an important way for new students to connect with the community and community members.

### **III. First Year Experience Courses**

One course that helps students feel comfortable in their new surroundings is College Students in Transition, Human Development (HDEV) 105. In its course description, HDEV 105 is described as a 2-credit course for new students to "assist in their transition to the University. Students will be provided with opportunities to explore campus resources, potential majors, and personal learning styles, as well as develop skills in oral presentations, critical thinking, and time management." This course is ideal for new students and will help them adjust to college life. I corresponded with Nancy Lamberty, a counselor in the University Counseling Center, who

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teaches one section of this course. Part of her syllabus includes an off-campus "Scavenger Hunt," where students have to go to 10 of 15 listed places off campus. Although the Scavenger Hunt is a small part of the course, its purpose was one of importance. Mrs. Lamberty said that students, upon completion of the course, have been motivated to begin volunteering in the area, and others have become comfortable venturing off campus to participate in leisure activities. Mrs. Lamberty believes that "it is important for students not to be afraid of their new environment." She understands that many students do not venture off campus during their years at Binghamton University and hopes her class will help change attitudes.

Binghamton University provides incentives for new students to take the First Year Experience course. Mrs. Souva from the Office of Campus Life says that HDEV 105 fulfills some Binghamton University General Education requirements as well as Human Development requirements. All sections of this course have an off-campus requirement, with the goal of helping students recognize that they are a global citizen and that they have a responsibility to the community. In Mrs. Souva's section of this course, she has her students research a local issue and plan a community service project in which other students can participate. This is important because the more incentives, the more students will take the course and will become familiar with the off campus area.

### **IV. The Practicum on Leadership and Community Service**

Professor Al Vos is faculty master of Hinman Community and teaches another mini-course called Practicum in Leadership and Community Service. The Practicum's objectives are to introduce first semester freshmen to leadership and community service and to deepen the understanding of community needs, social change, and civic engagement. This course is self-selective and most students who elect to take this class are already community service minded. Professor Vos believes this course taps into students "who are already interested and need to learn the college ropes." Professor Vos recruits students at freshmen orientation, when students are registering for classes. In Fall 2008, this course was open to Hinman students who lived in Smith Hall and was such a success that Professor Vos hopes to repeat this course and open it to any freshmen living in the Hinman Community. This course also offers opportunities for upperclassmen to mentor incoming freshmen. Professor Vos says that this course "gives freshmen a vision which they could develop in their college career. They can then jump-start their student leadership and service experience."

Students from Professor Vos' class have gained much from their experience. In a reflection essay, a student writes that this course "has pushed me to find what I love about Binghamton, and helped make it more of a home. I have met so many new people and can't wait to discover even more throughout my next few years at Binghamton." Another writes that each activity throughout the course was "valuable in helping me to acquaint myself with the Binghamton area, meet new people, and give back to the community." One student writes, "Each aspect of the course provided great insight either to Binghamton University or to its community." Another said that the course got them "out into the community and doing things [they] normally wouldn't have." This student would "definitely repeat the Practicum next year, and encourage others to take it." One writes that they looked forward to the class every week, and that it was a "great way to learn the resources of Binghamton and get involved. It also

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builds relationships and develops us individually." Another student reveals that without the class, they wouldn't know of their passion for community service. Many wrote of the challenges of getting off campus to volunteer but that they met those challenges. All of them recommend offering the course next year, as it was a positive experience.

### **V. Living-Learning Communities**

Professor Vos also runs the living learning community in Hinman. At Binghamton University, each residential community offers for freshmen an opportunity to take two linked classes along with students in their residence hall. The Learning Community's website says that this program "helps students interweave their social/residential lives with their academic lives." Another bonus to participation in the Learning Community is the increased accessibility of instructors. Instructors hold office hours in the residential hall and work with the Reslife staff to create programs outside of the classroom. This program is also designed to "help build the community environment, to assist students in their adjustment to college, and to create a more holistic experience for students."

When compared to students who are not involved in the Learning Community, involved students collaborate more, form their own study groups, and are more likely to discuss material from class outside of the classroom. The retention rate for Learning Community students is higher than non-Learning Community students. Currently, Binghamton's retention rate of 91% for freshmen is way above the national average of 68%. This is comparable to similar schools such as Boston University, New York University, Northeastern University and SUNY Stony Brook, who all have a retention rate between 89%-92%.

Professor Vos' ultimate goal is to have Hinman Community be known for its student leadership. He believes there are three legs which all have to cooperate in order to create living learning communities – Binghamton's Discovery Program, Reslife, and the Academic Departments. Unfortunately, the Discovery Program is changing next year and there will be no more linked courses; this means that learning communities will be completely refigured. However, these past efforts will not go unnoticed. A student from the leadership course writes that the course "introduce[s] new students to valuable information pertaining to Binghamton University [and] sets them on a track to be incredibly successful while studying at Binghamton University and in their futures... When I think of Hinman, I think of unity, attention to success, and promotion of setting goals... [The practicum helps to incorporate] even more leadership and community service activities to Hinman and Smith Hall."

### **Part III: RECOMMENDATIONS**

Although Binghamton University takes great efforts to involve its students with the community, it is important that these efforts are implemented further. The 11,000+ students at Binghamton University are selected from 30,000 applicants and have a lot to offer the Binghamton community. By engaging them in the community, students will make personal connections that encourage them to stay in the community after graduation.

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Firstly, efforts must be made to recruit the kinds of students who are more likely to get involved with the community. These students will make personal ties and will learn of job openings and internships and will be more likely to stay in the Binghamton area. Marketing efforts should be geared towards promoting the great things in the area. Mrs. Fabrizi said that a tour guide brochure written in the student voice, created by students and for students, would be the most useful way to introduce new and prospective students to the greater Binghamton area. These students are community service-minded and entrepreneurial.

Secondly, the orientation process must orient students to the off-campus community as well as the Binghamton campus. Students should have the opportunity to go off campus or at least learn of the great things that are offered. Although time is a consideration, informing incoming students about the community is a very important part of the transition process.

Thirdly, freshmen courses should be offered with the intention to integrate students into the outside community, either through leisure, such as the Scavenger Hunt, or through community service, such as the Practicum on Leadership and Community Service. Also, living learning communities should remain an important part of the freshmen experience as it promotes better student retention. These courses should be continued, as they were very effective in creating a feeling of involvement and fostering leadership. They must also be expanded and offered to more students while retaining a small class size to maintaining a personal feel.

Binghamton University has already taken many steps to include off-campus activities in orientation and the first year experience. For the academic year 2009-2010, Binghamton University has seen an increase in applications which means that there will be an even more select group of new students. The possibilities are endless for leadership, entrepreneurship, community service and keeping these bright students in the Southern Tier.

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