

Leadership Abstract

Riding The Winds of Change

Responding to the Remedial Needs of At-Risk Community College Students

Assignment C

Course # TSP 1820 - Leadership in Community Colleges

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## Riding the Winds of Change:

### Responding to the Remedial needs of At-Risk Community College Students

As community colleges move into the millennium, the challenge of dealing with at-risk students has taken on a renewed perspective. "At-risk students- most commonly defined as those students most 'at-risk' of attrition because of a lack of academic or social preparation for college- continue to flood into the community college and challenge educators to develop programs to identify and serve their unique needs" (Milliron & Leach, 1997, p.11). For the past two decades, community colleges in Ontario have viewed the problems of at-risk students as a low priority and have used 'band-aid' solutions to address these students' needs, primarily because this target group demands the most resources and services of a college organization. However, Ontario community colleges should begin 'riding the winds of change' and should recognize that addressing the needs of at-risk students is paramount to college-wide improvements in student success, retention, and graduation rates - the key performance indicators for institutional effectiveness.

The at-risk student population will not go away; addressing its challenges should not be postponed and cannot be ignored. Discussions about "how best to do it" should be replaced with "beginning somewhere and doing it now" (Roueche and Roueche, 1994, p. 3).

According to McClenney, "Innovation, even lots of it, is no longer enough" and will not effect fundamental change. "As we approach the millennium, forces are compelling us to raise the questions, make the hard choices, and implement the necessary changes so that innovations can move to something greater...from innovation to transformation" (1998, p.1). Leadership entails recognizing and responding to the 'winds of change', to the current trends which are challenging the survival of the college community.

#### The Target Population

At-risk students comprise a large target population in Ontario community colleges. For the purposes of this paper, 'at-risk' will be confined to those entry level students who are 'at-risk' academically. At Georgian College alone, 41 % of entry level students required some form of remediation in Communications or Mathematics in Fall 1998 (Payne, 1999). This statistic reflects a high proportion of entry level students who are 'at-risk' because they are underprepared academically, having learning disabilities, or have learning difficulties.

The number of community college students in Ontario who present learning disabilities is significant. The College Committee on Disabilities Issues identified 4,700 students with learning disabilities who attended community colleges in Ontario. The data reflect only the number of

students who were identified as having a learning disability. Of those students, 160 attended Georgian College (Special Needs News, 1998). “Marked by no outwardly visible sign of their handicap, these learning disabled students may pose the greatest challenge to higher education’s ability to accept and adapt to the diversity than any population accommodate thus far” (Special Needs News, 1998).

In addition, the data on entry level students who present with learning difficulties- aside from documented learning disabilities - are significant. The term ‘learning difficulty’ is used here to define the broad range of difficulties and/or challenges students demonstrate that cannot be defined as a learning disability. Although these students may not fit the definition of having a formal learning disability, they do show evidence of having difficulty learning. This fine distinction means the difference between having and not having special needs accommodations made to assist their learning.

Data collected at Georgian College (Payne, 1999) revealed that of the total entry level student body enrolled in Fall 1998, the percentage of first year students in remedial level courses was as follows: 34 % mathematics and 35 % communications. These statistics indicate that a percentage of over one-third of the new students entering Georgian College Fall 1998 was below the functional skill level for post secondary mathematics and communications. The data were based on eligible students. Eligible means based on scores from the College Placement Test (CPT).

Entry level students at Georgian College were also tested to determine if remediation was needed in computer technology. The data revealed that 38 % of the students were eligible for the Computer Word Processing course and 46 % were eligible for the Computer Spreadsheets course. therefore, the percentage of entry level students below the functional skill level increased from one-third to one-half when computer software skills and knowledge were included (Smith, 1999).

Furthermore, Georgian College data indicated that for Fall 1998, 27 % of new students were exempt from remedial courses; 33 % were eligible for one; 25 % for two; 10 %, for three; and 5 % for four (Payne, 1999). These data indicate that remediation touched the academic lives of a high percentage of new students and that a high proportion of entry level students were underprepared.

The data on retention also reinforce the significant need for remediation practices. The attrition rate from college post secondary programs in Ontario is more than 40 % (Milligan, 1992). The greatest student withdrawal rate is within the first three to five weeks of college entry (Rouche, personal communication, October 1998). Approximately one half of student dropouts occurs during or at the end of the first semester (Milligan, 1992). Georgian College student data revealed that the highest proportion of student dropouts occurred during the first three to five weeks and within the first three to five months (Smith, 1999).

### The Arguments

A number of community colleges in Ontario have chosen not to support remediation efforts for the underprepared student. With increased cuts in Ministry funding and with funding resources being allocated in proportion to the number of graduates in college programs, the resources needed to supplement remediation practices are financially overwhelming for institutions. The on-going argument is that community colleges in Ontario are not 'open-door colleges' as are the counterparts in the United States. Students who are accepted into Ontario community colleges have the requisite Grade 12 credits for eligibility. However, while these students may have credit eligibility, there is still a high percentage of these students who are underprepared in the basic academic skills. therefore, ignoring this target group would be ignoring potential stake holders in the survival of the Ontario college system.

A further argument is that if Ontario community colleges focus on remediation practices, then, *ipso facto*, the academic standards would drop. the argument is that colleges should focus on raising standards, adopting the "Harvard ' model. the argument suggests that addressing remediation would mean dropping academic standards.

Trends point to more university and college graduates returning to community colleges for further learning or development of skills to enable them to secure employment. This trend reinforces the argument of raising and preserving high standards. Quinley and Quinley indicate that " students who enroll in a community college after studying in a university setting are traditionally classified as *reverse transfers* because they counter the traditional linear progression from two-year colleges to four-year institutions" (1998, p.1.) However, they also indicate that "the number of community college students with extensive educational backgrounds who are enrolled in credit programs is larger than may be commonly recognized. Depending on the source, the proportion of community college students with a bachelor's degree or higher varies between 10 and 24 percent of the total credit and non-credit population" (Quinley & Quinley, 1998, p. 2).

Data from Georgian college indicated that of the total student body enrolled in post secondary programs during Fall 1998, 16 % of these students had college diplomas, 7 %, university degrees, 2 %, trade certificates, 5 %, some university credits, and 5 %, some college credits (Podziemski, 1999). Compared to previous data compiled over a five year span, the data on *reverse transfers* revealed a small but significant increase (Podziemski, 1999). If this data could be viewed as a reliable source to indicate a trend, then Georgian college, and perhaps other Ontario community colleges, could see the percentage of *reverse transfers* increase significantly (Podziemski, 1999). Therefore, the question of preserving the standards is an important value to consider if this population should increase.

### The Rebuttal

Addressing the remedial needs of entry level students is a risk factor. Pat Lang, Vice-President of Academics and Student Services at Georgian College, has stated that Georgian College's commitment to ensuring a remediation model of assistance to entry level at-risk students is the riskiest and most challenging endeavour that the College has undertaken (personal communications, March, 1999). The risk lies in the fact that every aspect of the College

infrastructure is affected by this commitment to addressing remedial needs of underprepared entry level students.

Addressing the needs of underprepared 'at-risk' students at the entry level should create a greater potential for increased student retention and increased student graduation success. this commitment should not imply a lowering of standards but rather a preserving of standards. Students lacking the basic skills should not be allowed to proceed until they had attained the competency skill level for success in post secondary programs. These desired competency levels have already been established by the college system in Ontario (Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, 1998) and have been used as a standard of achievement in the design of the Secondary School Curriculum reform (Carol Henry, Secondary School Reform College Validation coordinator, presentation to Georgian College, December, 1998).

Quinley and Quinley suggest that the trend in the increase in this population should lead us "to reexamine our traditional notions of the education pipeline. It may be time to think differently about how we describe the role of community colleges in education and to conceive of them as institutions that support *multiple cycles of education*" (1998, p. 1). A commitment to remediation practices would ensure maintaining post secondary curriculum standards at a level with which *reverse transfers* would be satisfied. Thus, colleges would be perpetuation the model that Quinley and Quinley advocate: colleges become adversaries of *multiple cycles of education*. Multiple cycles of education imply transformation.

### Conclusion

If community college institutions are to be effective, they must respond to the real needs of the community college system; they must begin 'riding the winds of change'. Ensuring strategic and effective remedial opportunities are available for all 'at-risk' students, instead of ignoring the problem or offering 'band-aid' solutions, means changing the traditional way of thinking and doing. Moreover, this traditional way of thinking and doing did not really keep the student and the student's needs in focus - in the centre of what it means to be a 'community' college. the 'at-risk' student is any classroom, in any program, and in any community college. the 'community' of community colleges in Ontario should begin the process of moving from "innovation to transformation" (McClenney, 1998, p. 1) in the way that they think about addressing the needs of 'at-risk' students in terms of institutional effectiveness.

"The 'at-risk' student is becoming the new majority.... the situation they create is neither impossible nor hopeless... unless, of course, we choose to ignore it or to underestimate the threat it poses. Pat Cross observed that 'the problems are clearer than the solutions, thereby draining the critical energy we need to create and develop viable solutions' (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. viii).

As community colleges move forward, 'riding the winds of change' into the twentieth century, the importance of meeting the needs of 'at-risk' students is, as Dale Parnell stated, "a window of opportunity for colleges and universities to help the disadvantaged and undereducated gain an economic foothold in a society that most of this population have never seen" (Roueche

and Roueche, 1993, p. 17).

Leaders take risks; leaders have vision; leaders respond to trends; leaders 'ride the winds of change.' True leadership in the Ontario college community will be evident when the college system works towards understanding and creating a learning culture that is truly supportive of learners.

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