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Barriers to Success in Fall Term FRINQ: Faculty and Mentor Stories about Their Students

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Barriers to Success in Fall Term FRINQ: Faculty and Mentor Stories about Their Students

At the beginning of Winter term 2010, Freshman Inquiry faculty and mentors were invited to a series of conversations about the students in their courses who had earned poor grades fall term (D, F, W or I) or had not returned to Freshman Inquiry or Portland State for Winter term. Students who earned low grades or did not finish FRINQ courses represented the range of academic majors on campus. While the program has been collecting quantitative information about student success and retention for the last two years, faculty and mentors, people who have direct insight into the reasons students aren't successful, had not been asked for their thoughts.

Twenty-one faculty, many with accompanying mentors, representing 29 of the 45 sections of Freshman Inquiry agreed to share their students' stories. The conversations focused on two broad questions:

- 1) What can you tell us about your students who were struggling academically fall term?
 - Were there predominant issues they seemed to deal with?
 - English Language issues
 - Writing proficiency
 - Attendance
 - Emotional/personal issues
 - Finances/work
 - Were there parts of the University or UNST that they struggled with?

- 2) What can you tell us about your students who did not return for winter term, particularly those who were doing well?
 - What were the main reasons they did not return?
 - Were there parts of the University or UNST that they had difficulty with?

FINDINGS: Seven broad themes relating to student success and retention emerged from these conversations. The themes are listed below along with the number (and percentage) of faculty, or faculty-mentor teams who mentioned that area as an issue for one or more of their students.

Life circumstances - Many students who struggled in FRINQ faced challenging life situations. Some students got the flu and missed classes; some students were dealing with substance abuse. Others experienced an illness in the family, family pressure or lack of family support that contributed to their lack of success. Financial challenges including a lost job, finding money for food, and being able to afford reading materials were factors for some FRINQ students.

- Finances: 9 (43%)
- Health (physical illness, learning disabilities): 9 (43%)
- Mental Health: 9 (43%)
- Family issues: 9 (43%)
- Other life circumstances: 6 (29%)

Academic Issues. Some FRINQ students arrived at PSU unprepared for college course work. They did not have experience reading and writing at a college level, which made their success very difficult. Another academic issue, which sometimes overlapped with preparedness, was

related to performance. Faculty described students who attended class regularly and seemed engaged, but who turned in no work; other students seemed well prepared but missed a number of classes.

- Academic difficulty - including writing, general unpreparedness, reading difficulty: 10 (48%)
- Academic performance - may not have difficulty, but has absences, does not turn in work, falls behind: 18 (86%)

Motivation and Purpose. A large number of faculty [15 (71%)] and mentors were frustrated with students who seemed to lack motivation. Some students did not understand the relevance of the course to their lives or career aspirations. Others didn't seem to understand why they were in college and what they would get out of it. There were also some students who reported not being challenged in the class. For many students a lack of purpose or motivation was related to issues with academic performance.

Campus Context. Campus overwhelming, lack of cultural capital [7 (33%)]. For some students, often first-generation students, the experience at PSU was overwhelming. They did not understand how college works or the kinds of work they would be expected to do.

Language/Culture. Difficulty based on limited English skill or lack of knowledge about the U.S. culture [12 – (57%)]. Asked about whether international students or English language learners had specific challenges, faculty responses were mixed. They noted that many international students and students whose first language was not English were very successful. However, there were also a substantial number of students for whom language difficulties, spoken and written, were getting in the way of their academic success.

Transfer. More than half of the faculty [13 (62%)] and mentors mentioned that students left FRINQ or PSU to transfer elsewhere. In many of these cases, students were from out of town or out of state and were returning home. In other cases, students had found completely different paths to pursue and were transferring to trade schools.

Other. Scheduling conflict with second term of course, needing only one term [6 – (29%)].

NEXT STEPS: While all the themes identified in our conversations were mentioned by a fairly high proportion of faculty, four emerged as a concern by more than half of the faculty who participated in the project: academic performance (86%), motivation, purpose (71%), transfer (62%) and language/culture (57%). The question is what kind of implications do these findings have for our efforts to improve student success and retention in Freshman Inquiry and beyond? What can Portland State University do in some or all of these areas to help students succeed despite the difficulties they face? What is the role of FRINQ faculty in these efforts? What issues would be better addressed by other services or departments on campus? What is the best way to facilitate faculty – student services collaboration to support students with problems? What is the role of faculty development in alleviating some of the pressures faculty face in dealing with students who have these difficulties?

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