



Catch Them Quickly
2003 First-Year Student Retention One Year Out
Research Brief No. 14

Introduction

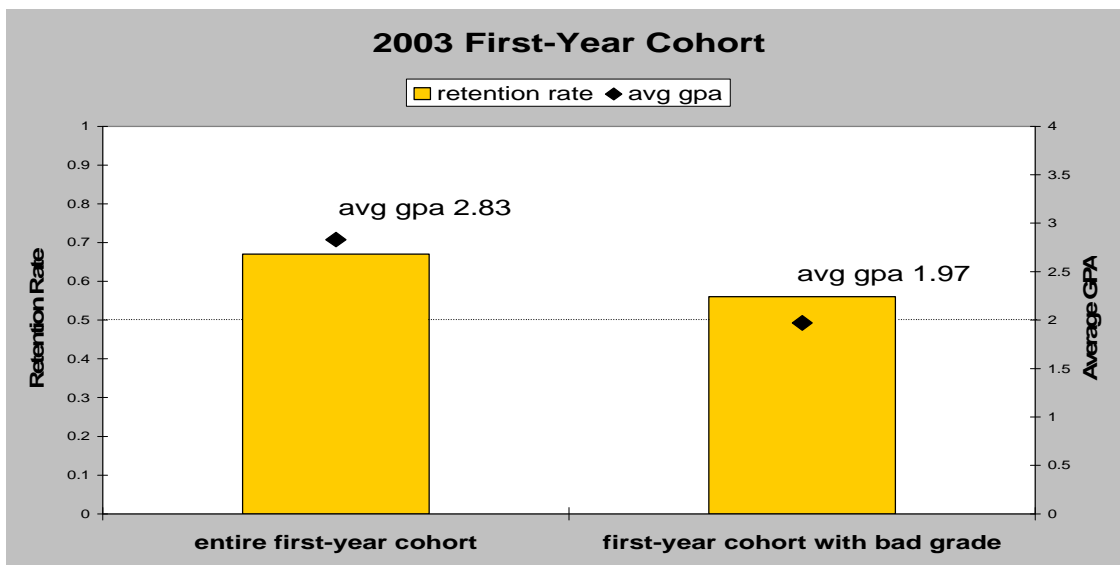
When they should be beginning their second year of study, UCCS has lost one-third of the entering class from the prior year. This attrition rate is much higher than that found at comparable universities that lose only about one-quarter of their new students by the start of the second year.

One factor leading to such loss among those who chose to start college here is finances. Many new students come from middle class families in the Pikes Peak region with limited ability to support children in college. This reality, in turn, causes new students who should be becoming acquainted with college life to be working too many hours at off campus jobs.

Another factor leading to attrition is the high number of students described above who do well enough in their first year of college to stay in good academic standing but who receive a bad grade (D, F) or withdraw from one course. They could go on from the single ego-deflating experience to become better students. Instead of accepting the bad grade and moving forward with their studies, they perceive UCCS as an unsupportive place and they bolt from here – in droves.

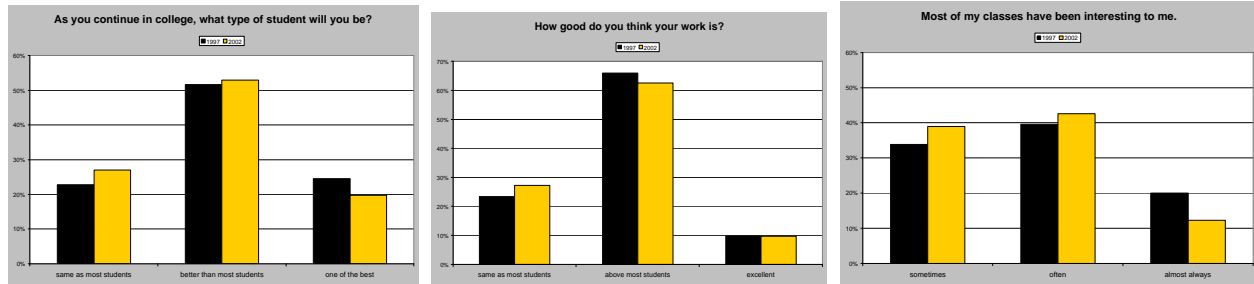
Overview of Attrition Pattern

In the Fall of 2003, approximately 920 first-year students enrolled at UCCS but only 2/3rds were retained to the following fall semester. The retention rate was a dismal 56% for students who failed or withdrew from at least one class—yet these students comprised half of the incoming student population. The vast majority of the first-year students who left UCCS had earned only one D, F, or W and remained in good academic standing. Retention can improve by as much as six percentage points if we catch these students quickly before the end of their first semester and before they react upon a defeatist attitude toward themselves and their education.



Changing Character of First-Year Student Cohort

The UCCS Surveys of First-Year Students (2002-2004) show a “mindset” change among incoming students. The past three entering classes report less certainty, motivation, and confidence about themselves and their college career than earlier classes. For example, the bar charts below show that the 2002 cohort is less likely to rate themselves as “excellent” or “one of the best” in comparison to the entering class five years earlier; also, they report less interest in their classes.



The changing character of the UCCS first-year students mirrors a national trend. At colleges across the country, “hovering and hyperinvolved helicopter parents” are tying up administrators’ time and hampering students’ development of self-reliance and responsibility.ⁱ These colleges have opened new offices to communicate with parents, provided material for parents during student orientation, and kept parents at bay when advisors meet with students. Perhaps more important than liaisons with parents are the effects that this parenting style have upon student learning.

Strauss and Howeⁱⁱ describe a new generation of students born in 1982 or later as “trophy kids” who are overprotected, sheltered, optimistic, pushed to excel, and taught to avoid personal risks. Maranoⁱⁱⁱ echoes the sentiment and derides hyper-sensitive parents for developing children into a “nation of wimps.” These are children who have become fragile and dependent young adults; controlled/organized play, liberal diagnoses of disabilities (mental health and learning disabilities), and over-emphases on self-esteem prevent them from developing important leadership and decision-making skills.

Also of note is the role of the cell phone “as an umbilical cord”^{iv} that keeps students in perpetual contact with their parents if something goes wrong—preventing the development of coping strategies to deal with the responsibilities of adulthood. If this is the case among UCCS first-year students, it is likely that they are getting advice from a parent who did not earn a college degree (50% have a father who completed college and 38% have a mother who completed college).

While bike helmets, minivans, and laptops have set apart the home life of this generation, their worldviews have been shaped by continuous military conflict in the Middle East as well as a culture of violence in the U.S. According to the Beloit College Mindset List, the incoming class of students share a mindset such that Iraq/Afghanistan have always been in the news, AIDS screening tests have always been available, a Banana Republic refers to a store rather than a puppet government, and automatics refer to weapons instead of transmissions.^v

In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the incoming generation of students is depicted by several different scholars. Librarian Richard T. Sweeney refers to this new generation of students born between 1980 and 1994 as “Millenials” characterized by their use of portable techno-gadgetry, a desire for multi-sensory multi-media curricula, a preference for hands-on and collaborative learning, and a

practical multi-tasking attitude.^{vi} Their attitude, according to linguist Naomi Baron, is self-centered; when faculty cater too much to Millennials' learning styles, the students do not learn how to solve problems on their own or how to communicate effectively. Instead, they learn that "what matters is how you express yourself, not whether anyone can understand what you have expressed."^{vii} An interviewed student chimes in as well, acknowledging that her generation is known for attention deficit disorders yet warning that technology and "pretty pictures or some interesting digital format" are appealing to students who have poor study habits.^{viii}

Pediatrician and well known author on adolescent development Mel Levine describes in *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes* a long-term feeling of entitlement in new groups of young adults who evaluate their college courses in terms of "how much fun they were" rather than on the level of academic challenge. Levine further elaborates that these young adult learners are not productive thinkers who "inspect a challenge" and "consider how best to tackle it." Today's young people have underdeveloped decision-making abilities, and as a result many make decisions too impulsively. Their rash decisions are made frequently without much thought to consequences. Levine also argues that colleges have not yet made an effort to understand the mind-set of the new generation. He concludes "we misread and therefore mismanage countless developing minds."^{iv}

A newer parenting style combined with a sense of uncertainty in the world could be influencing the character of first-year students. Our erroneous perception is that these learners are the same as incoming students from the past. We do not recognize that their characteristics have changed substantially from earlier generations. We are prone to lump them in with all the others we have known and we fail them easily. There may be a propensity towards defeatism or humiliation when students earn a bad grade, causing them to flee from the specter of failure.

What's Wrong?

Retention of incoming students to the second year of study at UCCS was at 57% in 1994. The rate increased steadily to 67% by 2001 and has remained level since. The past four years has seen substantial increase in the level of effort and devotion of resource to first-year students. Several examples of this student-oriented, pro-retention, institutional commitment include:

- The talent and effort of 338 individuals, of the 511 people who taught at least one course at UCCS in Academic Year 2003-04, contributed to the instruction of first-year students.
- Residence halls, in full swing after six years in operation, contributed to a retention rate of 73% among those first-year students who lived on campus.
- Nearly 500 first-time students enrolled in ID 101 in Fall 2003 with a retention rate of 72% among those who completed the course.
- More first-year students attended Freshman Orientation, met with Student Success advisors, and used the Excel Learning Centers than in previous years.
- More campus activities and recreational opportunities were provided to students during the school year than in previous years.
- A record financial aid amount of \$3.8 million was distributed to first-time students.

UCCS did more to see an increase in retention among the incoming class of 2003 than had ever been done previously. Additionally, the academic ability of admitted first-year students to succeed in college, as measured by the CCHE index, hit an all time high average score of 106. Yet, the retention rate remained unchanged at 67%.

By and large, the one-third of first-year students who do not come back are in a position to succeed in college:

- Two-thirds of non-returning UCCS students earned at least one bad grade
- The majority of non-returning UCCS students earned only one bad grade
- Non-returning students leave in good academic standing with a GPA of 2.23

Their dilemma appears to be an inability or unwillingness to deal constructively with an isolated case of adversity. Retaining just 10 more students equates to a one-percentage point increase in a cohort retention rate. UCCS could reach the 73% benchmark set by other “moderately selective” public universities by retaining one-quarter of the students who earn one bad grade. Reaching the national benchmark of 73% retention, by keeping a portion of these potentially successful students at UCCS, would net approximately \$1 million in tuition and fees per entering class that is currently being lost.

Predictors for Bad Grades

Students who earn a bad grade in their first year at UCCS tend to have lower high school GPAs and CCHE Index scores than more gifted entering students. A higher proportion of them are female or an ethnic minority, or both. As well, they are more likely to be first-generation college students. However, as a group, these students earn passing grades in nearly all other courses while at UCCS and are making progress towards graduation.

Good Standing in Other Courses

Of the first-year students who earned a poor grade in Fall 2003, 68% earned only one poor grade. The poor-grade earners generated a total of 1,286 grades and the majority of those grades were Cs or better (table below). Most of the poor-grade earners are not flunking out of school—most earn just one poor grade in their first year, then choose not to return to UCCS.

Distribution of Grades Earned by Students with at Least One Bad Grade		
Grade	Total	Distribution
As	195	15%
Bs	289	22%
Cs	234	18%
Ds	182	14%
Fs	249	19%
Ws	137	11%
Total	1,286	100%

Conclusion

A proactive step toward assisting these students is to increasing campus awareness that a larger segment of incoming students than in the past are prone to flee at the first sign of adversity. Nearly all of these students have the ability to succeed at UCCS but many leave after experiencing a single point of difficulty their initial semester and many more after the end of their first year of study. Understanding that this segment of youth was raised differently than previous groups of students may lead to less of a tendency to, using Levine’s term, “misread” these teenagers. The likelihood that most will stay and graduate from UCCS increases dramatically if they return for their second semester, and then their second year of study.

There also may be lessons present in the epistemological and pedagogical principles found among the disciplines of the campus that may well serve these developing minds. Seeking ways to influence these

students before they move out of reach will not only assist UCCS with retention, it may provide a critical positive difference in the intellectual and personal maturation of these young people.

ⁱ Pope, Justin. (2005). "Colleges Try to Cope with Copter Parents." *Chicago Tribune*, Aug 30.

ⁱⁱ Howe, Neil & William Strauss. (2000). *Millenials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. New York: Vintage Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marano, Hara Estoff. (2004). "A Nation of Wimps." *Psychology Today*. November/December, 37(6): 58-70, 103.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Beloit College Mindset List, 2007, available online <http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/>.

^{iv} Levine, Mel. (2005). *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

^{vi} Carlson, Scott. (2005). "The Net Generation in the Classroom." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct 7.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.