

**Retaining Sophomores
At Stanislaus State:**

**Final Report
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Keith Nainby, Katie Olivant, & Gerard Wellman

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Introduction

In 2012, California State University, Stanislaus' Student Success Committee identified the need to retain a greater percentage of students from their second to their third year. This project came to be known simply as "Retaining Sophomores." A workgroup of the Student Success Committee, the Sophomore Slump Subcommittee, collaborated with Institutional Research (IR) to investigate the attrition rates of students by the end of the sophomore year, termed the "Sophomore Slump" (Lemons & Richmond, 1987). IR issued an analysis brief titled "The Sophomore Experience," which identified how many sophomores were not being retained, how many of these students were transferring to other institutions, and how many were dropping out of higher education after the sophomore year.

The evidence showing that CSU Stanislaus has a problem retaining students from year 2 to year 3 can be found in relevant campus retention data. The campus is retaining about 87% of its freshmen – students moving from year 1 to year 2. However, retention drops an additional 10% after the sophomore year:

<u>Year</u>	<u>1st-year retention</u>	<u>2nd-year retention</u>
Fall 2008	82.6%	73.3%
Fall 2009	85.7%	75.7%
Fall 2010	87.0%	76.9%

This drop in retention from year 2 to year 3 is also cited in the "Action Research Project Ideas; Critical Issue 1: Persistence Patterns and Gaps among Various Student Groups." While the campus has programs in place for freshmen, such as an institutionalized cohort model First-Year Experience program, the campus has few opportunities specifically targeted toward sophomores.

Further, CSU Stanislaus is a majority-minority campus. For example, the entering freshmen cohort in fall 2013 included the following:

• Hispanic:	52.8%
• Minority:	66.3%
• Underrepresented Minority (URM):	55.4%
• First-generation (NCES definition):	49.6%
• First-generation (Federal TRIO program definition):	76.8%
• Pell Grant Eligible:	61.2%
• Pell Grant Recipients:	59.5%
• Requiring Remediation in English:	42.6%
• Requiring Remediation in Math:	29.2% ¹

¹ The percentage of students requiring remediation in Math was in the 40-50% range until 2012, when Early Start attendance reduced the percentage

We hypothesize that we are failing to retain students from year 2 to year 3 for several reasons:

First, our students are underprepared for academic work, which serves as a significant predictor for student persistence and graduation (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). This lack of academic preparation results in students not completing general education (GE) Math and English courses within their first 2 years (Adelman, 2006). This is particularly troubling as completion of college-level Math in the first year doubles the student's chance of graduation (Yeado, Haycock, Johnstone, & Chaplot, 2014). At CSU Stanislaus, based on the fall 2007 full-time first-time freshmen cohort, 34.22% of students who passed GE Math in year 1 with a D or better did not graduate while 56.72% of students who did not pass GE Math in year 1 with a D or better did not graduate. Another result of lack of preparation is that students often fail or withdraw from classes and do not achieve a minimum of 24 units per year in the first two years, which also serves as a significant milestone for persistence and graduation (Adelman, 2004; Yeado, et al., 2014).

Second, while academic preparation certainly acts as a strong predictor of student success, non-cognitive factors (e.g., self-efficacy, lack of support networks) also play a significant role in student persistence (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Often students do not have the ability to navigate the college experience, especially since many first-generation students have little home support in learning to navigate the system (Community College Executive Forum, 2014). First-generation and low-income students often also do not feel like they belong or have the intellectual ability to succeed (Yeager and Walton, 2011).

Third, our students may lack knowledge of financial aid opportunities and processes. Seidman (2005) identified this as a barrier to retention for Latinos/as. Given that CSU Stanislaus is an Hispanic-Serving Institution with 52.8% of the students identified as Hispanic, knowledge about financial aid opportunities and processes is an important factor to consider in student retention.

Given these three hypotheses regarding factors that may be negatively affecting persistence and retention by CSU Stanislaus sophomores, and with the support of the Office of the Provost as a component of our university's Student Success initiatives, the authors undertook a multi-stage research project to explore students' perceptions of these factors. This report reviews literature foundational to our research, documents our interview processes and our findings, identifies opportunities for further research in this area, and offers tentative implications for the university moving forward.

Review of the Literature

Why students are retained or non-retained on any university campus is, of course, a multifactorial issue whose precise causes are frequently difficult to isolate. The academic, published literature on this subject, however, is helpful, and allows us to generalize potential solutions to Stan State's difficulty in helping students persist through the sophomore slump.

Student Perceptions of Success

One foundational question this research sought to answer is why some students are more able to succeed than others who share their same demographic characteristics. We hypothesized that *perceptions* of success are exceptionally important during the sophomore slump and partially predict persistence, or its lack, in at-risk students. First, as Yeager and Walton (2011) found, student perceptions of their own success are quite malleable, even by small interventions. It does not take a major event or a significant crisis to shape students' perceptions of their own success; student perceptions are partially shaped by arguably minor, day-to-day events. Further, such perceptions of success are impacted by interventions that are not necessarily academic in nature but may include "students' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in and about school" (Yeager & Walton, 2011, p. 268). For the purposes of understanding why some students at Stan State do not persist through the sophomore slump, we would like to know how the university and the students' academic studies "appear" to them – that is, what beliefs did they gather from their subjective experiences in the classroom and to what extent did the student feel valued by their on-campus experiences (Yeager & Walton, 2011, p. 283)? Further, did non-retained students feel a sense of belongingness? Did they believe or perceive that they were members of the institution, that they had a place on campus? Yeager and Walton further describe "stereotype threat," which they define as "the worry that one could be perceived through the lens of a negative intellectual stereotype in school" which negatively affects academic functioning (p. 278). As Stan State is a majority-minority institution with a significant percentage of low-income and first-generation students, stereotype threat seems particularly relevant when considering methods of mitigating sophomore slump. Stereotype threat also raises important questions about whether non-retained students experienced affirmation of the values that were important to them as well as the role of academic and personal mentors in their college experience.

The Role of Exploration

As students move from their freshmen into their sophomore year, students' needs change as their interests develop, services targeted toward freshmen are no longer available, and the excitement of being a college student has perhaps declined. Schaller (2005) argues that universities tend to overlook such needs which are more developmental in nature partially because it is more difficult to measure, and partially because the university tends to assume that it is the students' responsibility to cope with such challenges. Schaller suggests that students who are at-risk or have not persisted perhaps did not progress beyond "random

exploration,” which she defines as “the change in environment and responsibilities [which, as a freshman] meant that the students had been experiencing themselves and their world in new ways” (Schaller, 2005, p. 18). At-risk students, she argues, perhaps remained in random exploration, not progressing to “focused exploration,” likely delaying important career-related decisions, and generally reporting that decisions they made during their freshmen year, during random exploration, did not have sufficient self-reflection. In other words, at-risk and non-retained sophomores’ random exploration perhaps did not meet their development needs as they transitioned into their sophomore year, precluding them from helpful and sufficient focused exploration (Schaller, 2005, p. 19). In focused exploration, students begin making decisions about careers and taking courses to prepare them for their career after graduation. Students remaining in random exploration will naturally lack a sufficient academic foundation for career selection, likely not be on a timely path toward graduation, and – critically – not be firmly rooted in their undergraduate studies should personal crises arise.

Different Types of Capital

Bourdieu’s (1971) work on cultural capital and Berger’s (2000) subsequent application of Bourdieu’s theories to post-secondary education have greatly influenced perceptions of the importance of one’s family during college, and thus indirectly led to recognition of the particular challenges first-generation college students face. In expanding Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, Yosso (2005) criticized the implicit perspective that white, middle-class values are the standard by which other forms of cultural capital are measured while also formulating related concepts like aspirational, familial, and navigational capital (Kneiss, 2013). For struggling sophomore students at Stan State, we need to examine their cultural capital as well as their aspirational capital (what are their goals, dreams, and desires? Was a college degree their goal, or someone else’s?), social capital (what, if any, individuals and organizations are providing emotional support?), and navigational capital (to what extent are they able to navigate and understand the university’s bureaucracy and how to access necessary resources?). The extent to which students possess certain types of capital, as well as the types of capital that are recognized and celebrated by the university community, can be predictive of at-risk student persistence and can also highlight ways in which the university is unintentionally or implicitly engaging in stereotype threat as discussed earlier.

Institutional Habitus

The role of the institutional culture and practices, what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) termed “institutional habitus,” directly influences student retention rates. Stan State’s norms and practices can impact – and be impacted by – students’ academic preparedness, their classroom experience, the university’s expectations of student behavior, financial pressures, as well as the amount and types of support services available (Thomas, 2002), which, in turn, affect persistence rates among at-risk students, value certain kinds of cultural capital (see Kneiss, 2013), and require navigational capital to understand and access bureaucratic resources.

With regard to institutional habitus, it is critical to consider whether curriculum favors certain types of knowledge and experiences, and whether this creates subsequent unequal statuses and stereotype threat. Crucially, were there any types of interventions that could have helped ameliorate such problems (Yeager & Walton, 2011)? Next, we should consider how at-risk students perceive their relationships with faculty; did they feel accepted and valued? Did they feel included in the institution as a whole (Thomas, 2002)? Finally, institutional habitus impacts certain types of social capital by requiring that students restructure their lives in terms of their work schedules, family commitments, commuting to campus, and, in many cases their living arrangements. Those with reduced amounts of pre-existing social capital are therefore left more vulnerable by these required changes.

Implications for Stan State Sophomores

“It is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed” (Tinto, 2006, p. 6). Our approach in the research documented in this report reflects the unique importance of CSU Stanislaus students’ own perceptions of the factors affecting their persistence and retention. For that reason, we conducted two distinct interview-based qualitative studies designed to elicit, and help us meaningfully frame, their perceptions—so that we might develop a stronger grasp of how the issues analyzed in the above review of literature are distinctively impacting our university. These two studies are described in the next two sections of this report.

Focus Groups

Key factors that the above research linked to university-level retention notably include those associated with students' own perceptions of their opportunities for educational success (Yeager & Walton, 2011). These factors also include additional dimensions that may be meaningfully reflected in the reports of Stan State students themselves, given their localized experiences (the role of in-depth exploration; institutional habitus) and given their particular life histories and the ways students might weave Stan State into their narratives of these histories (aspirational, social and navigational capital). The distinct attention in the literature on students' own perceptions of their experiences and opportunities led Retaining Sophomores project members to conduct an exploratory series of focus groups designed to identify relevant student perceptions that may influence Stan State students' decisions to persist beyond the sophomore year. We selected focus groups because this interviewing method promotes complex responses shaped by dialogue and by engagement with an immediate local context (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), an approach well suited to the Retaining Sophomores project goals of identifying potentially dynamic variables (such as students' academic and social practices and resultant perceptions) within a specific institutional context (Stan State).

Focus group participants were initially recruited through the Sophomore Success program, a component of the Retaining Sophomores project in which students with a demographic profile (based on the Noel-Levitz framework) suggesting they may have less chance to persist than the general Stan State population were contacted by the Office of the Provost and offered a targeted series of engagement opportunities (e.g., mentorship pairings, study groups, additional advising, early warning systems). Based on responses from students in the Sophomore Success program who indicated that they would be willing to participate in a focus group discussion of issues affecting their decisions to continue at Stan State, four focus groups were scheduled in September 2015. Three focus groups were conducted; one was canceled due to lack of attendance. Participants were offered the opportunity to win, through a drawing of names among all participants, a Chrome Book as an incentive to attend the focus group. The first focus group included five participants, the second group four participants and the third group twelve participants. The facilitator in each case was Dr. Keith Nainby, a Retaining Sophomores project member. Administrative support for the first focus group was provided by Ashley Amarillas and for the second and third focus group by Sarah Schraeder. The interview protocol for the focus groups is included in Appendix A.

The focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. Responses on the transcripts were then read by Retaining Sophomores project members and coded for thematic clusters within the responses. Open coding was used because a central purpose of conducting this focus group research is to identify students' perceptions of the factors affecting their decision to persist at Stan State, so the language and nuance of students' characterizations of such factors—in their own lives and in their engagement with our university—guided the naming and recognizing of themes.

Findings

Student focus group responses clustered around three primary themes, themes we titled (based on students' phrasing):

"I Need the Help"
"It Doesn't Cover Everything"
"We're Wasting Time"

"I need the help"

The first theme, "I Need the Help," centers on focus group respondents' characterization of Stan State as an educational environment they chose, and/or that they value, because they view themselves as a specific type of student: one who differentially (compared with students at other post-secondary institutions, with friends or with siblings) depends on support from advisors, counselors, mentors and engaged teachers.

Relationships with professors are a key reason, according to respondents, to select Stan State initially and to persist here. Representative comments from these discussion threads included:

"So I personally feel like if professors have good relationships with their students then students are going to think more positive of their classes and recommend other students to take them as well."

"Yeah, and the professors here are so helpful. Like you ask them a question and they just answer it. Well, my professors at least. I haven't had any bad professors yet."
"So, I mean, they're not pretentious and they're willing to work with students and, like, they don't feel like they're above the students. And, like, they're here to work with us and, like, I mean, they talk about other things other than just studies and so we got to know them at a more personal level which just has a more, has like a positive impact on education because we feel more comfortable with it."

Advising relationships are also significant for students emphasizing their need for help that extends beyond what they perceive as available in other parallel post-secondary contexts:

"Well, yeah [inaudible] there's a lot of help here and there's a lot of one-on-one. So if you went to San Jose State or something you'd be waiting forever to get a response. Because my brother goes to San Jose State and he's just like it's not even worth going in. So he's independent and does everything on his own. I'm like I need the help. Coming from my school they always helped you with everything. And you go to college and it's like who do I go to and then they're there."

"Like the connections you make here they definitely help you and kind of make you want to stay [inaudible]. And they encourage you. Like even though you're having doubts they help you. I know [inaudible] and I go talk to my advisor and like the

[inaudible] they definitely help you out especially when you have questions or help with your classes."

"But right here there's a lot of resources and nice people to help you whether you have financial problems, academic problems."

According to respondents, these supportive relationships depend on Stan State representatives embracing students as individuals with shifting, particular needs; examples of such relationships might develop in a variety of ways beyond one-to-one advising, Including with professors:

"So I got accepted to San Jose State but I didn't want to go there because I went through over the summer and my experience was really impersonal with the professors and everything. But I had a really good experience with professors here so far, like they knew me by name, the classes are small I feel really comfortable here. Versus in San Jose State I didn't like it, the campus is like 13 streets big it's so-- I don't know I think it intimidated me that's why I came over here. But my dad really wants me to transfer to San Jose State, I think he tells me like once a week to transfer and I don't want to. I like it here. Not only that but I think I've built [inaudible] relationships on campus and that made me kind of feel more at home. Because I guess my first semester I didn't really talk to a lot of people it made me feel kind of like isolated from everybody especially on campus. But now that I have friends here I feel like okay well maybe this is my second home, you know. And I don't want to go back to San Jose State because I like the school here, I like the professors, I just like my experience here."

with targeted student support programs:

"I had a good experience with that [inaudible] so like since summer I also attended Summer Bridge. So since Summer Bridge the advisors have been really involved with us up to now, and yeah they're really helpful I haven't gone to advising with my major, or about my major. But the whole general and even choosing classes and I don't really get discouraged when I told my advisor I want to double major which is kind of hard trying to do it in for five years. So yeah, he's really helpful with trying to tell me which classes I need, giving me options and telling me what's better."

with tutors at specific centers:

"So managing my time to actually school work or have a day off to gather everything that's been going on throughout the week, that's really stressful. Like I know I need help with it and like even at work they're nice enough to let me do my homework while I'm there when it's slow and stuff like that but yeah that's really just what I need help with."

with staff and peers in campus housing:

"I just I didn't want high school all over again. Not just that but the same thing just having a relationship with professors and being in a smarter classes. Because I have friends that go to UCR and like they send me pictures or whatever, and their class is huge, it's like [inaudible] it's huge though. And my friends at Fresno wants me to go over there but that was one of the reasons I kind of didn't want to come over here. But now that I made close relationships with-- I live in housing so I made friends and I'm in relationships with professors or housing staff. I feel like, this is like my home away from home I enjoy it now."

and with Campus Safety:

"And back to the police I like how they send out text messages or phone calls and like, oh, watch out for this and watch out for that. That's one thing. My home phone in Gilroy gets phone calls like CSU Stanislaus. I'm not even there yet. It's always good to know and kept in the circle."

The latter two comments, about housing and Campus Safety, help underscore a tone in respondents' remarks throughout the series of focus group interviews, which was their sense that Stan State can, distinctively among their educational options, help meet their basic needs for safety/security in both material and emotional ways. Respondents' attention to these safety and security needs supports Kneiss's (2013) claim that familial capital is complex and multidimensional in its linkages with other forms of social capital, and that our student population may have an unusually strong commitment to the importance of family, home and collective accomplishment as they pursue their educational goals. Some of the demographic characteristics of our student population (including high percentages of Hispanic, Catholic, female students) may help account for this emphasis on family, home and collectivity, but recognizing the importance our students place on these needs can usefully guide our planning and resource management efforts.

These results also indicate that the need students have to feel included in the institution as a whole, described by Thomas (2002), can potentially be met by attention to the dynamic, personal needs of our students. Moreover, such attention depends on actions not only by academic teachers and advisors, nor even only by support units that directly engage students such as the library, tutoring centers or student affairs offices, but by the tone of respect for the person we establish and maintain in each interaction, electronically and face to face.

Respondents addressed several complex interactional elements affecting their sense of belonging (Yeager & Walton, 2011). These elements included the unique importance of student involvement on campus given our large majority of community students:

"But definitely I feel like there's a lot of diversity on campus and it's really easy to become more involved, but at the same time also fell like it's kind of a commuter school, so there's a lot, kind of more, once, like, the first couple weeks of school passed, it's kind of harder to, like, I guess you could say to come more, to form

[inaudible] with people because unless you don't get involved, it's kind of easy to just go through the motions and just go through your classes."

Opportunities for on-campus involvement, which respondents also addressed in connection with the third theme we analyze below ("We're Wasting Time"). Yet in connection with the present theme of students' characterization of themselves as distinctively in need of direct contact and support, respondents also described the value of academic feedback loops, with professors and with peers, loops that not only help them improve their performance but that help them recognize themselves as having chosen the right school, the right courses, and the right degree path:

"I think like the JC is what makes me want to stay here because like my parents really pushed me to come here instead of JC right away. So like I know like half my friends all went to MJC and their experience there is pretty bad. So like even though it's cheaper and I wouldn't have to move or worry about financial aid on that. Like going through the hassle that I'm going through here, that's what really pushes me to stay here. And the academics it's better like over there it's really packed and it feels like a second high school. So yeah I just really like it here because of that [inaudible] towards dealing with more people because here you have closer relationships with even students in the classroom that you don't know."

Respondents highlighted that these messages depend on their ability to recognize that their educational spaces, and the relationships within those spaces, are evolving and responsive to their needs as they progress from high school to post-secondary learning and beyond:

"And in a way like how, [participant's name] was talking about like we are getting better, we're getting good grades, classes are difficult but we're working hard. So it's like we [inaudible] to get a positive reinforcement. So we're seeing the effects of our hard work. And it just makes us want to work harder to see more of the payouts of it."

These responses support Yeager & Walton's (2011) assertion that students' perceptions of their own success are malleable and can be affected by institutions like ours.

"It Doesn't Cover Everything"

The second theme, "It Doesn't Cover Everything," centers on focus group respondents' characterization of Stan State as an institution with recognizable limits in terms of its ability to positively intervene and to support the totality of students' needs—both materially and emotionally.

The most important dimension of this theme across all focus group interviews was, perhaps unsurprisingly, money. A representative comment emphasizes the way that university study, both short and long term, is itself an economic investment in the future, one not always manageable in the short term

even for students who believe that the investment could prove financially worthwhile in the long term:

"Well, the thing is too you like have to spend money to make money, even if you are looking into like scholarships or applications in certain areas sometimes you have to pay for them and you don't have the money to and there are a lot of chances and gambling. Like for example, I just recently decided that I'm going to try to do a pageant which is normally not my thing but you get up to \$30,000 in like prizes for scholarships if you win. But it costs about \$300 just to participate. And that's the biggest chance like do I want to throw away 600 just for a chance or do I want to keep this money and eat next month. Like you know, so it would be like--yeah which is important."

However, respondents also underscored more subtle factors that negatively affected their success in their classes and/or their opportunity to complete coursework at all:

"Well, for me it's the jobs and taking care of someone. My mom has polio and she adopted my three siblings and she's currently in the process of adopting five others and they are all my family members. So throughout my entire life all I've ever done is like help my mom with the kids and help her with whatever she needs. And that's where it becomes difficult for me like that's where like I have issues of being here because my mom I've always been there for my mom to help her and stuff. And being here so I feel like I'm being irresponsible to just leave her there."

"No, I went home for a family emergency, and it was when we had a student orientation. And since I was out of the country and I came back I guess I attended the last one so all the classes were taken."

Respondents' need to attend to family health and finances affected not only their material resources but their sense of the possibilities for educational attainment, a negative force on their perceptions of their success (Yeager & Walton, 2011):

"I can relate to her in that part like because sometimes being away from home it kind of makes me feel selfish like because like I don't know like there's so many things going on back home in which I feel like I have to be there. In order to not only support my mom but also my little siblings and like it's hard because like you want to succeed yourself but you feel selfish that you're only thinking about yourself you know. It's not, I don't know how to explain it but I feel selfish not being home or being too far away from home and not being there enough."

These reflections also point up the strong connection to family responsibility, even as young adults with educational prospects, that may make the Stan State student population different from white, suburban, middle class "traditional" college students in the ways Yosso (2005) suggests:

"And then, so like I get what she's saying like she feels selfish for being up here and that was like another reason why I looked into transferring. But then I kind of thought of it as like I would be benefiting him and the rest of my family but I would like discrediting myself because I would be like giving up what I'm doing here in a sense."

The connection to home extended, for respondents, beyond the family and included peers whose earning power far outstripped our students' earning power immediately after high school because their peers chose to work rather than pursue post-secondary education:

"So for me that's one of the things that sort of pulls me away from here. There's a community college from back in my city and a lot of my friends go there and they're living in their house with their parents, they're working, they're making money. They're driving nice cars and I'm like I don't even have a car [laughter]."

"Okay, I can see that I know a lot of people that they went to college and then they started, they like started working and you know when you're a college student like you're broke, you really don't have any money and less you have a job and then once they get a job they see the money coming. And like oh you know and it's like you know if I work more I get paid more so that's why I've known a lot of people that of ended up dropping out because they like the money coming in and not feeling like you don't have anything."

These reflections on the emotional impact of comparison to peers' earning power indicate a complicating range of factors that may profoundly shape Stan State students' sense of their own efficacy (Yeager & Walton, 2011); their cultural capital considered in the context of their families, neighborhoods and local communities (Berger, 2000); and their evolving aspirational capital once their post-secondary schooling activities begin (Kniess, 2013). The dynamic quality of financial resources' effect on respondents' mindset and, correlatively, their desire to persist at Stan State was indexed by one participant this way:

"That's a big thing because right now--well during the summer since I was working [inaudible] that I was doing like I've made over thousand dollars in summer and then I had been saving, not even like a cent and then I got here. I got my apartment it was rent after rent after bills [inaudible] and so right now I'm dead broke and I've been trying to find a job and it's like the hardest thing ever. Because like my schedule is all over the place and I just yesterday got like this one at USU from Board of Directors."

So even a student who takes the step (one we routinely recommend at New Student Orientation) to obtain on-campus employment notes that compensation, scheduling and smooth transitions from term to term can shape one's will to persist.

"We're Wasting Time"

The third theme, "We're Wasting Time," centers on focus group respondents' characterization of Stan State as an institution that they evaluate—as a quite significant part of their decision-making about education, in parallel with a sense of belonging and affordability—in terms of our flexible and, especially, timely engagement of their shifting needs.

The first point respondents' commonly addressed when the discussions explored this theme was communication, both from Stan State representatives to students and among Stan State departments and offices:

"Yeah, and nobody told me. If I would have known I probably would have got an extra class or something. So I feel like that's kind of affected me in a way. Because I'm probably behind too."

"I wish professors told you beforehand if you need the book or not. Because I bought so many books I didn't even use. It's like why did I buy this?"

"That's something I noticed a lot is the miscommunication between higher-ups and the local employees, does that make sense? I always had issues with that. And it's not just within financial aid it's the food, anywhere, there's just no communication. And then also in regards to the question, when I went to MSR over financial aid they actually didn't know how to help me or answer my questions and they sent me over to housing. And I don't know if that just happens to be because I live in the dorm so they would handle that area better than here."

Respondents thus emphasized what we might term, following Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), an institutional habitus that resonates more fully with their need for direct, individual attention and a collective approach to success, as described in the first theme above. Reading this emphasis through the second theme as well suggests that while there are challenges in our students' lives that we may not meaningfully impact given our limits as an institution, internal communication flow—an area we can likely profoundly influence—can counterbalance these financial and familial challenges and thereby positively affect student persistence.

A related topic respondents explored was the value of long-term planning assistance, a resources they perceived as only inconsistently available and strongly dependent on the vicissitudes of relationships with particular advisors or offices:

"I know it's going to take a long time to do that as well but like my plan was like to hopefully graduate the time I was like 21 or 22. And I realize that's probably not going to happen, so it's like that thing where we're not necessarily wasting time but it feels like we're wasting time."

"It's like, you can plan out what you want to do and what classes you want to take but there's always going to be something that gets in your way. Like I was planning on taking like two classes this semester and I was wait-listed and it was like oh Lord, and then I went for the first two weeks, professor told me straight up like you're not

going to be able to get into his class. So I ended up not going back and then I had this girl that I knew and she's like oh why did you stop going people actually dropped their classes, and I was like are you serious? Like I needed that class it was essential so that something that I know that pushes me back a lot not been able to take the classes that I need because of space and all that."

"...but the advisory for my major is just like they said--well is just another professor, you don't actually have a major I mean advisor for psychology. You just go to any professor and they tell you what to do, so I wish there was a specific advisor who would know exactly answers to every question."

These responses suggest that students' institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002) at Stan State does not always involve a positive sense of efficacy or access to resources with respect to long term planning of academic coursework, and that their pathways through the university may be more arbitrary than intentional.

One way respondents made their engagement with planning, and other strategies for educational success, more intentional and directed was to identify relationships with on-campus or off-campus support structures, such as student support programs or family members, who could partner with them as they developed a deeper understanding of their evolving needs in the present and the future:

"So it was kind of a big like surprise. But I did good overall during the first semester. So no one told be like, I was thinking 12 units. I talked to, I have EOP, I talked to my EOP advisor and they didn't tell me like you know how supposedly you're supposed to take like 15, at least 15 in order to, if you want to be on track."

"And for like NSO I had no idea what I wanted to take. And I think I actually picked like some wrong classes because I wasn't sure like how it was working until I talked to my PACE advisor. And she helped me pick my schedule. And like every semester we have at least like two or three meetings and talk about the schedule, like what are you going to do, what are you planning on taking next semester. So I think they're like a really big part of that."

"Yeah, so I'm a type person that my mom raised me to be a planner, so from freshman year to--yeah, from freshman year I planned out pretty much the four years. I planned out the classes I needed and I made sure I did my GE's so that I find ever wanted to change my major, I could change it and it wouldn't affect me in any way. So I've been doing that and actually like helped me multitask and do it, it didn't come out perfectly this year like I had to like drop some classes and like fill it in so I like reworked my four year schedule. But it actually helped me."

These strategies, grounded as they are in academic planning spurred by major programs and a baccalaureate-level focus, parallel the notion of in-depth exploration that Schaller (2005) discusses. Respondents framed the importance of

degree-based, multi-term planning, and the way that Stan State representatives can significantly promote such planning, as advice for incoming students:

"Go see an advisor like once you like first start. You know, you might not need it, but you can go meet with them and actually find out things like important things about your major, or if you're undeclared they can help you."

"And maybe the four year plan just make sure you know you're on the right track in taking the classes."

A related component of respondents' advice for incoming students was their recommendation to get involved in campus events, something initially taken up in the first theme above ("I Need the Help") and that also supports Schaller's (2005) claims about deep exploration, Kneiss's (2013) claims about navigational capital and Thomas's (2002) claims about institutional habitus. A representative comment was this one:

"Go to the events. They're so much fun. And maybe you can interact with others. I have a co-worker who she's a freshman now. And she didn't know that Stanfest was free. And she was like, oh no, I don't want to go. And I was like you know it's free to students, right? She's like really? And she would have went if she knew that."

Implications

Given these findings, three implications we draw that may promote sophomore-level retention and that may be within the sphere of targeted action by our university include:

- Structure as many programs as possible—from NSOs to Student Support Services to academic program advising—in the form of personal interactions in which a primary purpose is relationship development (rather than merely accomplishment of instrumental goals such as speedy registration or mandated information distribution)
- Promote Stan State, through marketing campaigns and in public texts such as web communication and on-campus design, as a safe, secure home environment grounded in collaborative learning and collective support
- Highlight the financial and scholarly efficiency of multi-term planning, in promotional materials and in interactions with students whenever possible

Interviews

In February 2016, the Stan State research team, composed of Keith Nainby, Katie Olivant, and Gerard Wellman, started meeting regularly to develop a plan for further data collection. In a continued effort to address the central questions of why the university is not retaining a significant number of students after their second year and why some at-risk students are more able to succeed than their demographically comparable peers, we determined to conduct phone interviews with the target population of non-retained students and a set of retained students who had similar demographic characteristics. (Please see Appendix B for the phone interview questions.) The list of potential participants, disaggregated by various relevant demographic variables, was obtained from the University's Institutional Research Office.

A total of 58 non-retained students were sent an initial email informing them of the purpose of the study and that they would be contacted by phone to participate in an interview. A student research assistant then attempted to contact them by phone. However, almost all of these attempts were unsuccessful, either because there was no answer or because when reached, the student declined to be interviewed. Of the 58 students contacted, only one student agreed to be interviewed.

Opportunities for Further Research

Co-Inquiry as an Assessment Methodology

In March of 2016, one of Retaining Sophomores' principal investigators, Gerard Wellman, attended Wabash College Center of Inquiry's workshop, "Students Engaging Students to Improve Learning: Using Student-Led Focus Groups to Gather and Make Sense of Assessment Evidence." He was accompanied by another faculty member from Stan State, Dr. Christopher Claus, as well as three undergraduate students from political science and communication studies.

The Importance of Co-Inquiry

First and perhaps most importantly, this workshop emphasized the need for, and usefulness of, engaging students in the work of gathering assessment data. Workshop presenters termed this collaboration "co-inquiry." In co-inquiry, as presented at the workshop, students are trained in a number of ways – topics include IRB training, interviewing and focus group facilitation skills, data analysis, final report generation, among others – which not only teach students new skills, but crucially enrich the data collected. This is notably useful when dealing with assessment data. The workshop presenters from North Carolina A&T University hypothesize that university students are more likely to be more open, honest, and vulnerable with fellow students than faculty or staff members; thus, the inclusion of students as co-facilitators can introduce subtlety, nuance, and clarity to assessment data.

Using students as co-inquirers in the study of teaching and learning first appeared in academic literature in 2003, when Carmen Werder and Megan Otis are

credited with successfully proposing the concept (Werder & Otis, 2014). Since 2010, co-inquiry has been gathering speed as a desired methodological tool. As discussed at the workshop,

Co-inquiry implies a shared conceptualizing process involving the co-development of questions to explore. The nature of co-inquiry is such that one question typically leads to another and thus animates and sustains a relationship among those seeking answers to these questions. Thus, at the heart of co-inquiry is the critical role of shared questions and the co-generation of those questions.

In other words, faculty, staff, and administration are not capable of conceptualizing assessment questions to explore with student subjects without some form of student input. Students as co-investigators are critical to developing questions, methodologies, incentives, etc. that will generate the greatest amount of data, phrase questions in accessible ways, and employ appropriate methodologies in a dialogical forum.

The Practice of Co-Inquiry and Retaining Sophomores

As presented at the workshop, developing a methodology for the collection of assessment data should be done in consultation with student co-inquirers. This, naturally, necessitates that students be knowledgeable and informed of issues like IRB consultation and development, general methodological guidelines, research ethics trainings, and data collection practices. However, faculty and administrative researchers need not view such trainings as a burden since they represent a high impact practice in which co-inquirers learn new skills, are able to practice such skills, and facilitate the development of new knowledge about the institution's habitus, practice, and outcomes.

Through collaborative work undertaken at the workshop with undergraduate students from CSU Stanislaus, a co-inquiry methodology was developed for expanding Retaining Sophomores work to include student-led workshops. The various stages of such a methodology include:

1. Recruit and train student(s) for inclusion as co-inquirers
2. With student input, develop IRB proposal
3. Train students on effective focus group leadership skills, including facilitation, note-taking, and data analysis
4. Co-inquirers rehearse focus group facilitation with faculty members and eventually conduct pilot focus group with other students
5. Incorporating feedback from pilot group and faculty input, co-inquirers conduct focus group(s)
6. Once transcriptions are complete, data analysis can begin

This proposed co-inquiry methodology naturally includes a few caveats including funding (for example, some method of compensation should be found for co-inquirers, either through monetary or course credit compensation), developing incentives to attract sufficient and appropriate student involvement in the focus groups, and addressing any issues raised through the IRB process.

This proposed methodology was presented at the workshop, and received valuable feedback from other participants as well as the workshop hosts, which

were incorporated above. Pending grant funding, this methodology could be used to expand the Retaining Sophomores program once student co-inquirers can be recruited and funding issues are addressed.

San Jose State University Action Research Report

In late May 2016, we became aware of a report on an action research project conducted by Oliver, Pizarro, Cheers and Tamiko Halualani (2015) at San Jose State University, which sought to understand why students, particularly underrepresented, first-generation students, left the university. Although the study was not specifically focused on sophomore retention, the research questions were closely similar to those of our research, and the methodology they employed is instructive and applicable to the potential continuation of our project.

Oliver et al. sought to address the following questions:

- “What factors influenced students’ decision to stopout or leave (dropout) SJSU?
- What happens to stopouts and dropouts? Do they enroll in other colleges, go to work, both, or other?
- Do certain interactions contribute to feeling less connected to the University?
- How can SJSU students feel more connected and supported by the University?” (p. 5)

The study’s methodology comprised three parts: a quantitative records analysis, a survey conducted by phone or online, and online focus groups. In a phone interview (June 8, 2016), Pizarro described the key components of the study’s methodology and factors that influenced a high enough response rate.

- The phone survey was conducted consisted of three cohorts that began Fall 2012, Fall 2013, and Fall 2014 and focused on individuals from the three cohorts who did not enroll Spring 2015.
- For the phone survey, the researchers utilized teams of undergraduate students to make phone calls from SJSU phone bank. Pizarro reported that the student callers were invested in the project because they could identify with the experiences of the non-retained students.
- According to Pizarro, the student callers were “relentless” in their efforts to contact their peers, often making 4-5 attempts to contact an individual student.
- The callers left messages when possible. Either in person or on the message, they explained that survey participation really mattered because it would help current students. The callers also provided support to phone survey participants in helping facilitate a return to school by taking notes on those who expressed an interest in returning and passing on the information to a staff member who would follow up.
- The callers utilized a Qualtrics survey, which they could fill in for the participants while on the phone. Participants were also given the option of being

sent by email a link for completing the survey online. Ten dollar Starbucks cards were provided to those who completed the survey either by phone or online.

- 214 phone contacts resulted in completed surveys, an 18.5% response rate from the original sample of 1,157 individuals who did not enroll in Spring 2015.
- After the phone survey, online focus groups were conducted by a faculty facilitator and two graduate student assistants for more in-depth, qualitative data using FocusIt software. An additional incentive was provided to focus group participants. Pizarro reported that the focus group data required a lot of “unpacking”, as students often reported that “personal problems” were the reason they left, but further digging and analysis revealed that students are taught to blame themselves for things that faculty members or other University constituents are doing to alienate or disenfranchise students, particularly those that lack the social capital that some of their peers have.

Recommendations

Based on success of the methodology employed by the San Jose State research team as well as the introduction of a co-inquiry process, we recommend reconfiguring our project using an adaptation of their procedures appropriate to our purposes, student demographics and campus environment. These procedures would include:

- Development of a context-specific Qualtrics survey that can be administered to non-retained and retained students by phone or online.
- Employment and training of student callers to administer the survey by phone, and to offer non-retained students assistance with a return to the University, as appropriate.
- Facilitation of online and / or in person focus groups of both non-retained and retained students by faculty researcher(s) and student research assistants.
- Provision of incentives to participants who complete the survey and / or participate in the online focus groups.
- Development and implementation of sustainable campus protocols and programs based on the findings of this research, as well as continuing to research retention issues.
- Seeking grant funding and other opportunities to develop regional partnerships to address retention. For example, SJSU has applied for a grant with SFSU and East Bay to form a regional consortium focused on retention.

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Appendix A – Focus Group Questions

Q1: How has money, and paying for classes, affected your decision to continue with classes at CSUS? [Follow-up examples/themes if these do not emerge: Financial aid availability; completing the FAFSA; availability and use of financial counselors; personal and family finances]

Q2: How have your relationships with people on campus affected your decision to continue with classes at CSUS? [Follow-up examples/themes if these do not emerge: Academic advisors; classroom professors; other mentors; people in MSR offices; people in Student Health; people in Public Safety]

Q3: How have your relationships with people off campus affected your decision to continue with classes at CSUS? [Follow-up examples/themes if these do not emerge: Immediate family; extended family; friends from college; friends from high school; others also in college or who have finished college themselves; other mentors]

Q4: How have opportunities off campus affected your decision to continue with classes at CSUS? [Follow-up examples/themes if these do not emerge: Job opportunities; personal relationships; relocation]

Q5: How have personal challenges off campus affected your decision to continue with classes at CSUS? [Follow-up examples/themes if these do not emerge: Personal health; health needs of friends and family; other challenges]

Q6: How has your success in previous classes affected your decision to continue with classes at CSUS? [Follow-up examples/themes if these do not emerge: Poor grades on exams; poor grades on assignments; difficulty making changes to study patterns; ability to connect with other students; ability to connect with professors; availability of and use of academic support resources]

Q7: How has your success in planning your degree program affected your decision to continue with classes at CSUS? [Follow-up examples/themes if these do not emerge: Academic advising beyond the immediate scope of the “next semester”; choices of major; linking major to career options; availability of classes in the schedule; ability to plan a schedule of available classes in conjunction with off-campus schedule]

Appendix B – Interview Questions

1. Please describe what factor or factors led to your decision return / not to return to CSU Stanislaus. How did you decide to return/not to return? When did you decide to return/not to return? Have you ever considered dropping out? If so, tell me about the most recent time you felt like dropping out? If not, why not?
 - a. Tell me why you enrolled in college. Did you see college as a path to achieving your goals?
 - i. Tell me about the first time you remember having that goal
 - b. Did you feel like you “fit in” or was “home” on campus? Did you feel a sense of community on campus and in your classes? If so, describe a situation in which you felt this way
 - c. How often did you run into someone you know on campus?
2. What surprised you about being a college student?
3. Tell me about your experience finding campus resources. Advisors? Financial aid? What else?
 - a. Did you enter college with a declared major and / or an idea about a career path?
 - b. If so, who or what influenced that choice? Did your plan change while you were a student here?
 - c. Did you attend new student orientation?
 - d. How did you decide which classes to take? How did the classes you took relate to your major?
 - e. Did you feel like you understood what was being discussed in your classes?
 - f. Tell me about mistakes you made. Were there courses you took that you need to take?
4. Who or what resource(s) helped you during your time at Stanislaus?
 - a. Can you describe your living arrangements while you were a student? To what extent were you able to choose where you lived and who you lived with?
 - b. Can you describe your transportation arrangements to/from campus? Were there any challenges with transportation you encountered?
 - c. How many hours were you working off campus each week?
 - d. Did you feel like you were “in control” of decisions you were making about your college experience?
 - e. To what extent did you have financial independence to make your own decisions about your college experience?
 - f. Were you involved in any student organizations? Leadership?
 - g. How many campus events and activities outside of class do you/did you typically attend in one month
 - h. Did you know any other students who you would describe as “actively involved” on campus?
 - i. Did your classes have Supplemental Instruction, Service Learning, group projects, what else?

- j. Did you feel that your professors knew who you were? Did you ever visit their offices?
 - i. How did you feel when you interacted with them?
- 5. What concerns or challenges did you have during your sophomore year?
 - a. Did you ever feel disrespected on campus? If so, describe what happened.
 - b. What could the university do to help you feel more accepted?
- 6. What successes did you have during your sophomore year?
- 7. If you could give advice to a person very similar to you who is now completing high school and is thinking about attending college, what advice would you give?
 - a. Would that advice change, or be more precise, if you were giving advice to someone you knew was considering attending Stan State?
 - a. In hindsight, what could the university have done to help you more?
 - b. What did the university do that helped you?

Appendix C – Initial E-mail/Phone Call Script

Initial Phone Call to Setup Interview Time

Hi, may I speak with ___ please? ___, my name is ___, and I'm at Stan State. A research group at Stan State is trying to learn more about why some students who take classes here aren't continuing with their classes. Would you be willing to schedule a time for a faculty researcher to ask you some questions about that? We're thinking the interview should take about half an hour, and we'd like to schedule it for sometime in the next few weeks. What do you think—would you like to answer some questions about your experiences at Stan State?

Initial Email

Greetings, ___. I'm working with a research team at Stan State that's trying to learn more about why some students who take classes here aren't continuing with their classes. I'm planning to phone you at XXX-XXXX in the next day or two to ask if you'd like to answer some questions, in an interview, about your experiences at Stan State. Would this be the best way to reach you by phone? If not, please let us know the best way to contact you. I hope you might enjoy participating in this project; we'd be very grateful, and your ideas would be helpful to Stan State.

Appendix D – Institutional Review Board Approval



California State University, Stanislaus
Institutional Review Board
One University Circle, MSR 160
Turlock, CA 95382

(209) 667-3493
Fax: (209) 664-7048
IRBAdmin@csustan.edu

IRB BOARD MEMBERS

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Julie Johnson, JD
Campus Compliance Officer

IRB Administration
Joyce Bell
UIRB Administrator

March 28, 2016

Marjorie Jaasma
One University Circle
Turlock, CA 95382

Re: Protocol #1415-143

Dear Marge,

Congratulations. The revision to your protocol “Retaining Sophomores” has been approved via Expedited review. This designation is for one year and will expire on March 27, 2017. If you have any questions regarding this designation, please contact the IRE Administrator at (209) 667-3493.

Please Note:

Human subjects research liability protection from the university only covers IRB-approved research by faculty, students, and employees of CSU Stanislaus. If your employment or student status changes during the year or if you make changes to your methods, subject selection, or instrumentation, please discontinue your research and notify the IRE to obtain the appropriate clearances.

If any research participant experiences a serious adverse or unexpected event during or following participation, please notify the IRB Administrator immediately.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan M. Neufeld". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "S" and "M".

Susan M. Neufeld, Ed.D., Chair

cc: Keith Nainby
Gerard Wellman
Katie Oliviant