

SUCCESS IN FIRST YEAR

The impact of institutional, programmatic and personal interventions on an effective and sustainable first-year student experience

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Overview

The situation is hopeless....we must take the next step!"
(Pablo Casales)

It is gratifying to observe and contribute to a maturing field of practice and scholarship. The first year experience has travelled a considerable distance both practically and emotionally in the last 10 to 15 years. On reflection, our collective excitement in the 'early days' about great possibilities and rapid institutional transformations was akin to what Darryl Conner (1981), in writing about the emotional cycle of change, would term a state of 'uninformed optimism'. A range of challenges, resistances and constraints soon became evident, and while we persisted, we perhaps did so intermittently in a state close to that of 'informed pessimism'. This is usually characterised by feelings of helplessness, stuckness, resentment and contagious cynicism. This is however, thankfully not a particularly enduring situation, and there is clear evidence that we are moving forward. Our next developmental milestone is to evolve the frameworks, strategies and personal resources that will allow us to be 'hopefully realistic'. I am confident that we are starting to address some of the predictable challenges that face our field of practice:

- *Heroic individualism* To date much of our change narrative has necessarily focused on the efforts of enthusiasts in local contexts. We are starting to develop a necessary narrative about mainstreaming and embedding sustainable practice.
- *Status* There have been significant challenges in locating the FYE enterprise in the academic status hierarchy. We are starting to see the increasing professionalisation and recognition of this work as 'core business' and a growing understanding that student success cannot be simply delegated as a support function.
- *Alignment of strategies* We are moving towards an understanding that there is no one idea or silver bullet that will do the job. We are beginning to see less discussion about the merits of individual strategies and more discussion about their useful alignment to create learning environments that will facilitate student success. We are developing a systems perspective.
- *Quality of evidence* In the spirit of innovation and support we have been fairly forgiving of each other as we present our evaluations of 'things we have tried to do'. We are starting to see a strengthening appreciation of the need for rigour in evaluation and an understanding that the decision-makers we seek to influence may value different forms of data (e.g., economic).
- *Leadership* We have been 'leaders in practice' for a long time but we may not have claimed this for ourselves as a 'state of mind'. Growing our capacities for leadership is I think the crucial ingredient for us evolving and maturing as a field.

Structure

The approach I will take in this keynote presentation will be to talk about my practice as a *First Year Advisor* at Griffith University. My intention is use this as a means of illustrating

how I have tried to honestly engage with the dual challenges of effective and sustainable practice. As with all things, this is a work in progress.

By way of background, a few words about the First Year Advisor role at Griffith. The University's First Year Advisor (FYA) strategy is informed by the literature regarding the value of academic advising (McArthur, 2005) and its links to student engagement (Tinto, 1987). First Year Advisors are recruited from the academics teaching in a particular program and are members of staff who understand, and are interested in, first year students, their issues and experiences. The role has been designed to facilitate the successful transition of commencing students to university. First Year Advisors respond to student needs and concerns, providing commencing students with a local, predictable, non-judgmental and accessible point of contact at the most critical and formative phase of their university experience. A First Year Advisor is allocated to each or a cluster of related undergraduate programs across the University. The role is in its fifth year (2005-2009) and is responsible for School-level transition-supportive activities such as developing a degree-level first year experience plan, leading and organizing academic orientation and transition and monitoring and advising at-risk students. This innovative strategy is the first of its kind to be implemented systematically at the whole-of-university level in Australian higher education.

In the interests of credibility, it's useful to say at the outset that the approach I will discuss does have a measure of effectiveness as evidenced by evaluation data. Our overall data for 2007, the first year in which we implemented this strategy, shows a 13% improvement in student retention even with slightly lower student entry level scores than for 2006. Retention data for 2008 shows that we are in the top 30% of programs nationally, thus meeting our Institutional target goal. Our institutional data also shows a gradual increase in all key indicators, and places most of our scores above the Griffith averages.

Foundations for Success: Working Strategically

'Don't just do something, stand there!'
(Zen proverb)

What do we mean by 'working strategically' to achieve success in first year? I have found three elements to be foundational to an approach that is both effective and sustainable:

- Effective *leadership* sits at the heart of an effective approach to first year orientation and engagement. In my experience there is significant value at the School level, if a single person can be positioned as the acknowledged leader of the first year experience. This contributes to both empowerment and accountability. Leadership is of course as much a matter of attitude as position. Importantly a stance of leadership does not mean "doing all of the work"
- Adopting a *system's orientation* is crucial for ensuring shared ownership and contribution. The meta-task here is the convening the relevant stakeholders who, in partnership, will design and implement the first year orientation and engagement program.
- An agenda of *facilitating capability* ensures a focus on the development of strengths rather than the remediation of problems. At a systems level this implies developing the capability

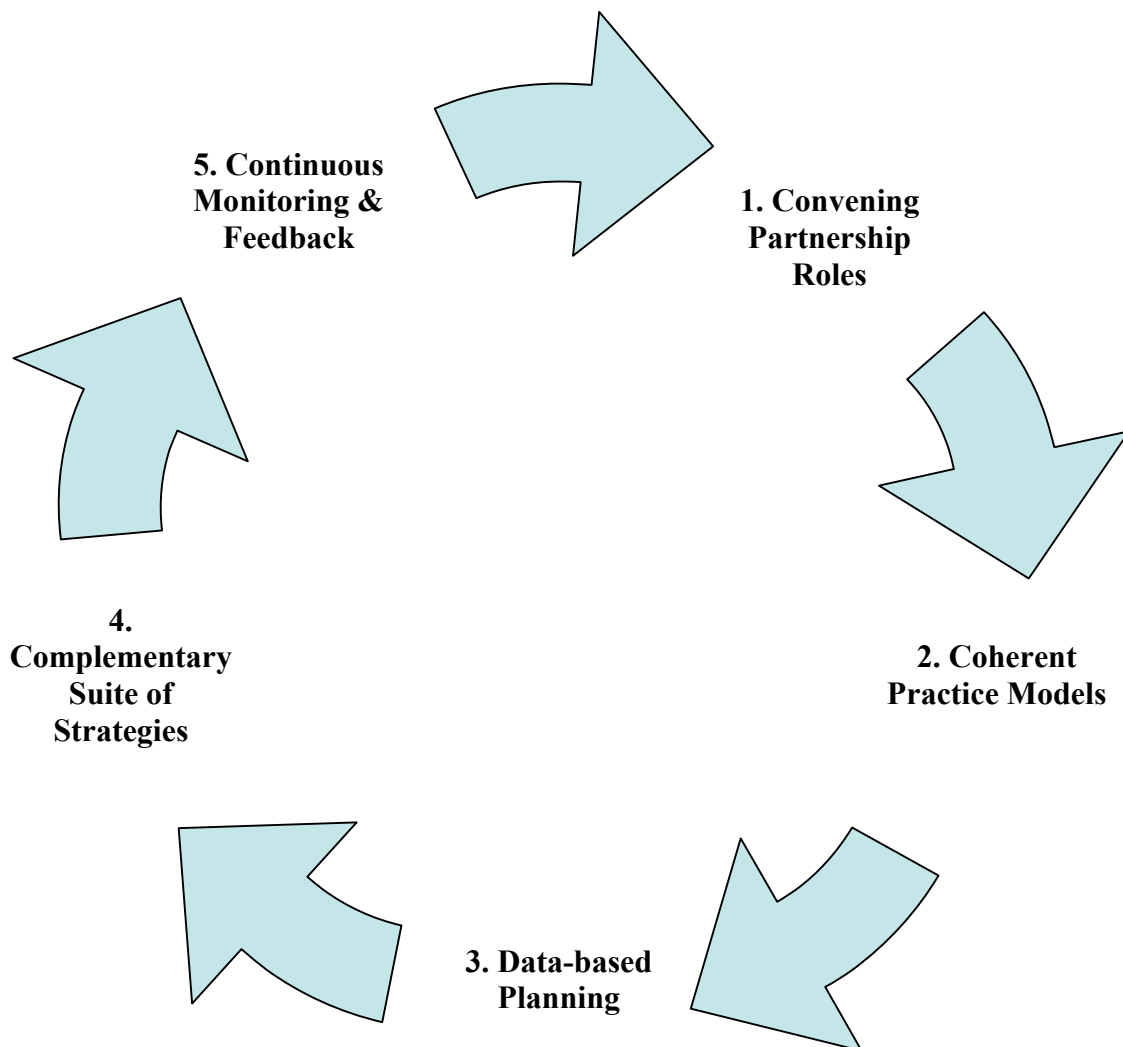
of staff to create and sustain a positive learning environment. For students this implies a focus on developing their capabilities to be self-managing learners.

So if this is the mindset, how is this translated into practice?

Design Process and Principles

These three foundational ideas about ‘working strategically’ are operationalised through five design principles: convening partnership roles, developing coherent practice models, data-based planning, employing a complementary suite of strategies, and engaging in continuous monitoring and feedback (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Design Process and Principles



1. Convening Partnership Roles

“The universe is made up of stories, not atoms.”
(Muriel Ruketser)

If we are to learn from the lessons of heroic individualism then our necessary priority must be convening the relevant partners or stakeholders who either have a stake in the quality of, and/or who are directly involved in the delivery of the first year experience. Thus, a key role of the First Year Leader is to identify and engage the relevant partners. Potential partners can range from academic managers, academic colleagues, administrative staff and students within the School/Department, to academic and professional staff in central university student support functions. The core leadership and management role is assumed by a single staff member with the delegated authority, which is in Griffith’s case, the First Year Advisor.

The idea of ‘convened partners’ provides benefits beyond just the realities of stakeholder engagement in the change process by which all partners are working towards the same outcomes. A whole-of-School approach provides commencing students with a “joined-up, wrap-around” educational experience. This approach our facilitates students receiving a set of consistent messages from multiple sources, concerning *our belief in their efficacy* (“We all want you to succeed, and we will support and challenge you to do so”), *our welcoming of their presence* (“We value difference, and whoever you are, and wherever you come from, you have a place in our program”), *our expectations of partnership* (“We can’t do this without your active engagement and involvement”), and *our commitment to follow-through* (“We are conducting a joined-up, coherent process not a disconnected series of events”).

2. Coherent Practice Models

“There is nothing quite as practical as a good theory.”
(Kurt Lewin)

Our approach is also underpinned by foundational models based on an understanding of both the *commencing student tasks* in making a successful transition to university, and the *university system’s processes* required to support successful transitions. Our student process models include the *senses of success* (Lizzio, 2006), and the *student lifecycle* (Higher Education Academy, 2001), both of which are evidence based. So what do we know from the research into key factors which predict commencing students’ success in their first year of study? The research literature identifies a clear pattern of predictors of academic success which are consistent with the experiences of educational practitioners. We know that students, on average, are more likely to succeed if they:

- ✓ *Invest time on task* – time spent each week studying is the strongest predictor of academic success;
- ✓ *Regularly attend class* lectures and tutorials (thus increasing opportunities for learning) is also a strong predictor;
- ✓ *Balance their commitments* (e.g., working on average not more than 15 hours a week in paid employment if studying full time);
- ✓ *Develop a social network*, however modest (e.g., even knowing one other student’s name at university offers some protection against dropping out);
- ✓ Have a *clear reason or goal* for attending university (e.g., vocational direction);

- ✓ *Engage with the online environment* which moderates success in contemporary university life;
- ✓ Have some measure of *academic self-confidence* (self-efficacy is foundational to success in many aspects of life).

And conversely, students may be *more likely to drop out if they*:

- ☒ Don't develop a social network at university;
- ☒ Don't have a sense of vocational purpose in their degree;
- ☒ Don't regularly attend lectures and tutorials (with the exception of a small number of very bright young men);
- ☒ Don't have access to, or engage with the online environment;
- ☒ Do work more than 25 hours a week if enrolled full time;
- ☒ Are the first in their family to attend university (low social capital);
- ☒ Are a member of a minority or disadvantaged group (e.g., Indigenous, rural, refugee, disability, international, single parents, primary caregivers).

Senses of Success

Based on an analysis of the available evidence on successful life transitions generally and student transition into higher education more specifically, my colleague Alf Lizzio developed the *Five Senses of Success* framework (Lizzio, 2006) which conceptualises student success in terms of five domains: sense of academic culture, sense of connectedness, sense of capability, sense of purpose, and sense of resourcefulness (see Figure 2). The power of this model is that it provides a *user-friendly shared-language* for both students and staff and *frames the tasks* that have to be addressed to make a successful start to university life. More importantly it emphasises the recognition and development of *students' strengths*. Here is a brief description of each domain:

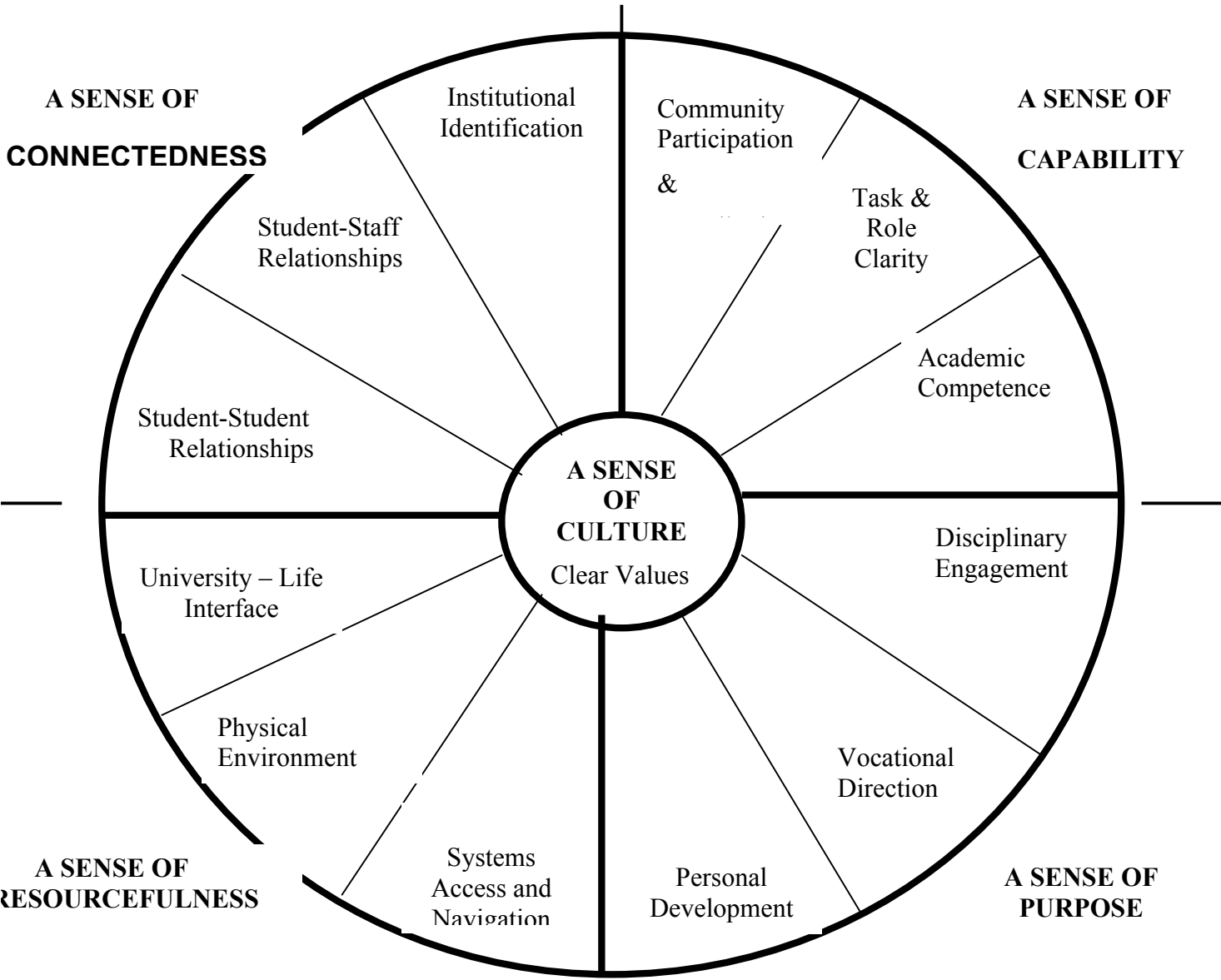
1. Students' success at university depends on their sense of capability

Students who are better prepared for the roles and tasks of university study (viz., 'learning ready') tend to have greater early academic success and are consequently more satisfied and persistent with their studies. A student's sense of capability depends on how well they understand what is expected of them in the student role, their mastery of basic academic skills and their level of commitment to contributing to their learning community. *We can help develop a sense of capability* by clarifying and negotiating expectations, providing entry level development of academic skills and engaging students as active members of a learning community.

2. Students' success at university depends on their sense of connectedness

Students with stronger connections are more likely to be successful learners, effective colleagues and happy people. A student's sense of connectedness depends on the quality of relationships with peers, with staff and their feelings of identification or affiliation with their School or University. *We can help develop connectedness* by providing opportunities for students to form good working relationships with their fellow students and with staff and encouraging them to get involved with the university.

Figure 2 : The 'Five Senses' of Student Success



3. *Students' success at university depends on their sense of purpose*
 Students with a clear sense of purpose are not only more likely to find their study rewarding, but also to be more committed and persistent when the work gets challenging. A student's sense of purpose depends on their sense of vocation, their engagement with their discipline of study and their capacity to set personal goals. *We can help develop a sense of purpose* by providing opportunities for students to be as clear as they possibly can about their reasons for going to uni and their choice of degree, to see the relevance of their course of study and to systematically develop their strengths and talents.

4. *Students' success at university depends on their sense of resourcefulness*

Successful students not only know how to study but also how to proactively manage the challenges of their whole university experience. A student's sense of resourcefulness depends on their ability to navigate the university system to get the help and information they need, willingness to speak up if they have a problem and an ability to balance their work, life and study commitments. *We can help students to be more resourceful* by providing clear and accessible roles, procedures and resources and encouraging timely help-seeking behaviour.

5. *Students' success at university depends on their sense of academic culture*

Successful students know the value of learning 'how things are done' and what is important or valued in new culture. A student's sense of cultural competence depends on their appreciation of the core values and ethical principles of the university and how these will inform their approaches to study and working relationships with fellow staff and students. *We can help students begin to appreciate academic culture* by clearly and simply answering the question: "what is a university?"

For an educational practitioner, perhaps the most valuable aspect of the five senses framework is that it provides both *evidence-based guidance* for intervention and a *theoretical lens* for reflection and evaluation. It thus facilitates both conscious and reflective practice.

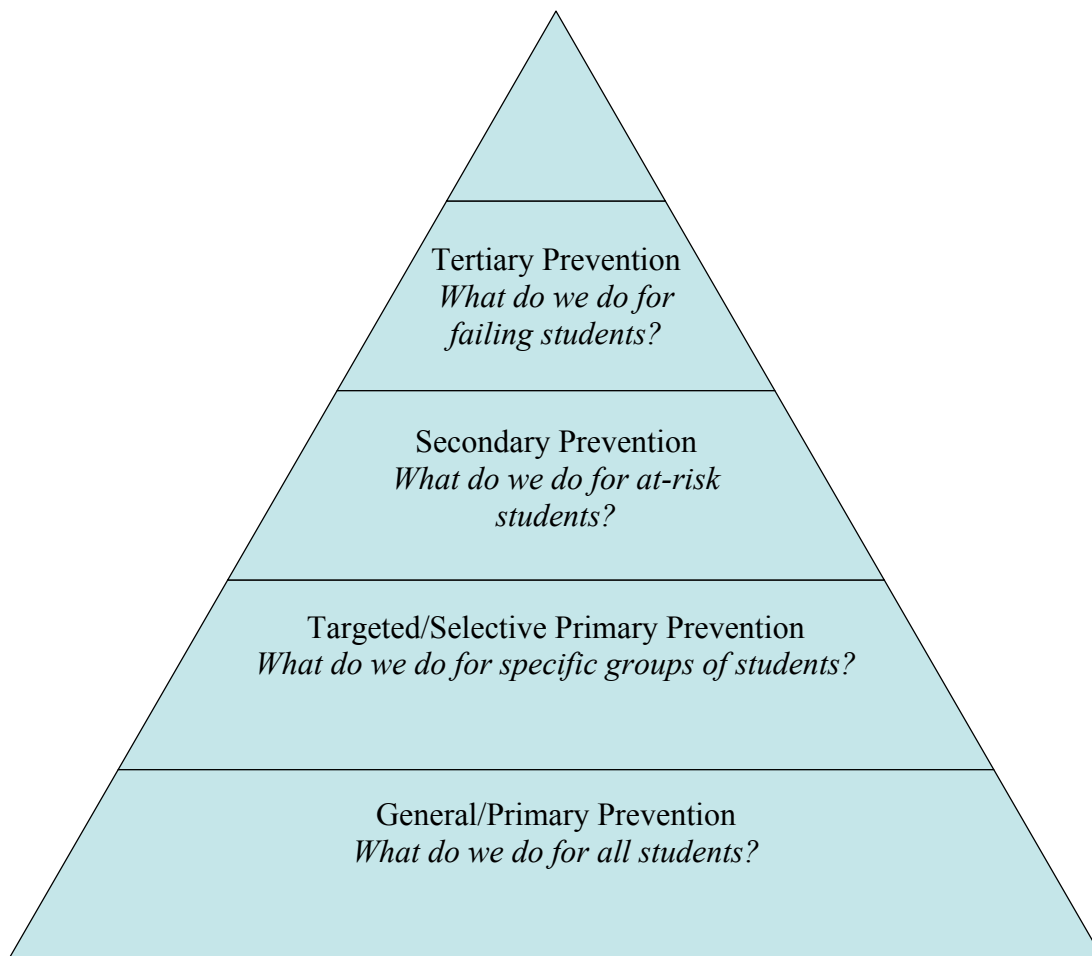
Student Lifecycle

The conceptual framework of the student lifecycle (Higher Education Academy, 2001) is particularly useful in focusing our practice on the student experience and in helping us to design timely forms of student support. There is fairly wide recognition that effective transition into and through higher education is a continuous process with students facing an evolving set of transition tasks and milestones from the early point of 'aspiring and deciding to attend uni' through to graduation. The task of 'facilitating transition' thus requires a developmental framework to identify students' needs and developmental priorities vary over their degree trajectory (e.g., early contact at the point of student offer, to pre-semester activities to facilitate student engagement and orientation, to the first few weeks of both semesters in year one, to the transitions from year one to year two, years two and three, and eventually to alumni and postgraduate student status. The key notion is that of providing just-in-time lifecycle appropriate interventions that will facilitate student success.

Levels of Intervention

It has long been understood in disciplines such as public health and community development that the tasks of 'facilitating change' and 'helping people' require a sophisticated understanding of the needs, strengths and risk factors of not only the population as a whole but also the different groups within it (Caplan, 1964) (See Figure 3). The guiding principle is that 'success' requires a fine-grained understanding of the needs of different groups to inform and match appropriate types and levels of intervention. The meta-aim is a coordinated and judiciously escalated set of interventions that are both comprehensive in scope as well as focused in intent. Applying this mode of thinking to the task of facilitating the success of commencing students, allows us to conceptualise a sequence of levels of intervention. Most fundamentally, *primary prevention* strategies are those conducted based on our understanding of the needs of the whole commencing student population (viz., what early activities will be useful or protective or strengthening for all students?). *Targeted or selective primary prevention* strategies are those offered based on our understanding of the characteristics and backgrounds of specific groups of students (e.g., indigenous, international, etc) (viz., what early activities will be useful or protective or strengthening for particular groups of students?).

Figure 3: Levels of Intervention Framework



Common examples of targeted primary prevention include contacting Indigenous and International students prior to their orientation to offer personalised School support, and to ensure their connection with existing university services. As the term indicates, *secondary prevention* refers to the process of managing the emerging risks or vulnerabilities of individuals or groups (viz., what early activities might mitigate the problems or activate the resources of particular students?). Common examples of secondary prevention include strategies for identifying and intervening with at-risk students such as those who trigger evidence-based risk markers such as not submitting or failing their first assessment item. Finally, *tertiary prevention* involves the process of responding to more fully-formed vulnerabilities or problems (viz., what activities might be helpful for students who are evidently in-trouble or at-risk). Common examples of tertiary prevention include strategies for responding to students who have failed one or more of their first semester courses/subjects.

Employing these types of practice models produces a number of related benefits. Firstly, we have found that they provide a *sense of coherence* when thinking and talking about the task at hand with colleagues. Secondly, an *accountable commitment to evidence* also seems to facilitate colleagues confidence and buy-in to the often perceived ‘flaky venture’ of helping

commencing students: the meta-message we are sending is that “we are approaching this in a scholarly and systematic way”. Translating our ideas and activities into a simple shared institutional language, facilitates student’s confidence and trust, the meta-message is that “we have really thought about this and we know what we are doing”. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, scaffolding and conceptualising the task at hand facilitates student’s self-management: the meta-message here is that “we are not just giving you information, we are providing you with tools to do a job”.

3. Data-Based Planning

“Vision without action is a daydream
Action without vision is a nightmare”
(Japanese proverb)

Ideology, passion and good intentions can only take us so far. In the final analysis we have to work in and act on the so called real world. Effective practice needs to be informed by ‘what is going on’. The types of data that we value and use will depend on the decisions we have to make and the stakeholders we have to influence. However whatever our choices and preferences, data based planning needs to occur at a range of levels, and informed by multiple data sources:

- ✓ *Presage or input data*, such our particular *Institutional student populations* and the typical demographic profile (including risk factors) of commencing students in particular Schools/ Departments
- ✓ *Process evaluation data* (e.g., evaluation of enabling processes or orientation activities)
- ✓ *Soft performance outcomes* (e.g., student satisfaction)
- ✓ *Hard performance outcomes* (e.g., student retention, academic achievement)

One innovative *institution-wide exemplar of data-based planning* is the Starting@Griffith survey process. Between weeks 4-7 all commencing students are invited to respond to an online quantitative and qualitative survey of their experiences-so-far in the student lifecycle (pre-orientation, orientation and first weeks of semester) across the five senses of success and related factors. The data from this survey (usually a 30% response rate) is framed into reports for academic managers and staff in schools and programs. These reports enable local decision-makers to benchmark their performance against other elements in the university and to monitor change over time. This not a curiosity-driven ‘data for data sake’ exercise, but rather an *action research process* to inform goals and strategies and drive responsive and timely action. Most critically, the student voice, captured systematically, is centre-stage in this planning process. Once again coherence is a key meta-theme, with the design of the Starting@Griffith survey based on the five sense framework, thus ensuring alignment between practice models and evaluation tools.

Interestingly, analyses of our students’ responses inform some underlying assumptions of the value of investing in primary and secondary prevention strategies:

- ✓ *Student satisfaction can be facilitated*: The five senses of success (viz., felt levels of connection, capability, purpose, etc) do predict the overall early satisfaction with university of all commencing students
- ✓ *Orientation can be enabling*: Commencing students’ perceptions of the extent to which they experienced an ‘effective orientation’ does contribute to their level of overall satisfaction and academic achievement (GPA) in their first semester at university

- ✓ *Persistence is predictable*: The two strongest predictors of students ‘not returning’ in semester 2 are low academic self-confidence and an unclear sense of purpose
- ✓ *Targeted intervention is helpful*: Students who are primary carers in their families or who have a disability are less likely to return than other students in semester 2.
- ✓ *The future is more important than the past*: Students who are ‘first in family’ are just as likely to succeed as ‘second generation’ students

Such institutional research helps us to not only understand our current context, but also to identify our vision. In this sense it enables the key meta-task of naming the *strategic gaps in our performance*. Following the logic and protocols of strategic planning we are then able to identify key differences we should be trying to make (*strategic goals*), useful ways of doing this (*strategic activities*) and resources we will need to invest (*commitment to action*). The desired outcome is a *First year Orientation and Engagement Plan* for an academic element. Plans by themselves of course do not achieve anything, they are vehicles to focus and release energy. Thus involving colleagues in the planning process, negotiating with leaders both formal and informal are critical steps in gaining commitment to, and resourcing of the goals and strategies. Sustainable improvement will not be achieved through heroic individualism.

4. Complementary Suite of Strategies

In many ways our approach can be thought of as simply being a response to the “facts of student life”, namely, that to some extent: all students have the same needs; groups of students have different needs; students have individual needs; and, all students have unpredictable moments or challenges. The implication of this is there is no single right answer or ‘silver bullet’. Rather facilitating transition requires, by definition, a multi-faceted and complementary suite of both co-curricular and curricular strategies.

Historically, the *first generation* approach to orientation and engagement emphasised the co-curricular domain (viz., activities and services which are offered parallel to and somewhat independently of the classroom context). Common examples of first generation approaches include orientation days, centrally run study skills workshops and academic advising. Such strategies have a critical role to play and some would say have carried more than their fair share of the burden of helping students in the face of academic indifference. Most pleasingly, we are now witnessing the emergence of a set of *second generation* strategies. The increasing evidence that the classroom environment and the core practices of education (e.g., teaching quality, course design, etc) are the front-line factors influencing the student experience and success is driving the development of related notions of learning community (Tinto, 2009) and transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) with the aim of scaffolding student learning and providing opportunities for early success. Common examples include engaging course and assessment design, formative assessment tasks, and community building in the classroom. An overview of the potential range of both curricular and co-curricular strategies across the first year student lifecycle is presented in Table 1.

I will now consider some of these strategies in a little more detail. An exhaustive coverage of first year interventions is neither feasible nor useful in this present context. My intention is to communicate a practical on-the-ground understanding of why we implemented certain strategies, how we did so and with what outcomes, both intended and unintended. The tone is very much reflection on action

4.1 Curricular Strategies

Enhancing Course Design Would you design a first year course in the same way as one in later years? Your answer will probably be “Yes and no.” You would answer ‘Yes’ in the sense that there are obviously ‘universal design principles’ (e.g., John Biggs’s (1999) notion of constructive alignment) that guide course design more generally. You would answer ‘no’ in the sense that first year courses carry a broader agenda than those in subsequent years. The implication of this is that we need to give conscious attention to designing “transition facilitative” learning environments. We have found the “five senses of success” framework particularly helpful in sensitizing us to the developmental tasks facing commencing students. Thus the dual aims of any first year course are helping student ‘learn the curriculum’ and helping students ‘learn to be successful students’. Thus effective first year courses are more likely to explicitly address tasks across disciplinary content (the curriculum), student processes (learning strategies) and culture (the learning environment). The more that individual courses in a degree program can co-ordinate these developmental activities the more students will experience their degree program as coherently designed and implemented.

Front Loading Threshold Courses/Subjects Not all courses are created equal! As a general rule, in all first year programs there are one or two courses that students consensually identify as ‘more difficult’ than others. These courses become the defining ‘gateways’ or ‘thresholds’ for the degree program. In effect, such courses can become “make or break” experiences for commencing students, and are often associated with a decision to transfer or drop out. Now this is not necessarily a bad-outcome for all students, but the pedagogical and ethical question for us still remains: *Did we design and teach this course so that students were given every fair chance to succeed?* One approach is to create *enabling rich environments* “front-loading” such courses, particularly in first semester to optimise students’ academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Common examples of front-loading include:

- ✓ *Pre semester* Offering front-end preparatory workshop activity
- ✓ *First week* Explicating assumed knowledge
- ✓ *Early safe self-assessment* Basic formative test and feedback exercise
- ✓ *Academic recovery* Support/input following poor performance on early tasks
- ✓ *Supplemental instruction* Offering supplementary/just-in-time tutorials
- ✓ *Peer tutoring/reciprocal learning* Activating students as sources of learning

It is important to emphasise that the aim is not to ‘hand hold’ or ‘baby’ students, (as is sometimes pejoratively claimed by colleagues) but rather to provide opportunities for students to build academic confidence and self-regulation. We should not be surprised to hear that student form most of their enduring academic habits, capabilities and attitudes (good and bad) in their first year at university. The seeds of later success are sown and have generally sprouted or wilted in first year. ‘Providing more support’ is not the answer, nor the intention. Rather, our aim should be to proportionally balance challenge and support. Challenge without support is academic cruelty and social Darwinism in action. Support for its own sake is academic welfare and counterproductive to the purposes of higher education. This should not be a discussion that is hijacked by falsely framed stand-off between academic ‘wets’ and ‘drys’.

Enhancing Assessment Practice Optimising the chances of an experience of “early success” builds academic and personal efficacy. Whether we like it or not assessment defines the curriculum for students. Consequently it is a critical factor in helping or hindering student engagement and retention. Not surprisingly, it is also an area where there is commonly a lack

of fit or incongruence between staff and commencing students' (mis)-conceptions (e.g., What's involved? How best to prepare?) and expectations (e.g., What investment is required? What help is available?) of assessment tasks (Collier & Morgan, 2008). This is even more likely to be the case with first-generation university students who, by virtue of their circumstances, may possess significantly less cultural capital and academic resourcefulness (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). So what might we do to enhance our assessment practices with commencing students:

- Consider the *nature of assessment tasks* (Design with relevance and engagement in mind)
- Judiciously *time our* assessment tasks
- Provide early *low-cost opportunities* for academic adventure/failure
- Scaffold and guide the *preparation process* (e.g., provide practice items, input on essay writing, a mini-workshop in tutorials on the structure of an assessment item).
- Facilitate *feedback-rich process* (e.g., peer to peer, staff to peer, self-reflection)
- *Debrief and normalise* common experiences and stressors

The effectiveness of these types of strategies in facilitating student success in courses where they are systematically employed is indicated by the halving of failure rates on the first assessment item, and similar reduction in the non-submission rates for the second assessment items in core courses.

Enhancing Teaching Quality There is a considerable and growing body of research, both Australian and international, (e.g., Wilson, Lizzio & Ramsden, 1997; Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002) that supports the common-sense but crucial idea that 'good teaching' makes a difference to students' learning, academic achievement and satisfaction. The relational aspects of good teaching are particularly salient for commencing students which suggests the importance of *small-class contexts* (e.g., tutorials, labs) for building their engagement and efficacy. The specific system-based approach that I have adopted to enhancing teaching quality is to create the formal role of Tutor Development Coordinator and from this convene, engage, train and manage a team of "First Year Tutors" to work effectively with commencing students. What makes this approach different from the usual 'staff development' exercise is that firstly, it is explicitly focused on *capacity building*, starting with having clear notions of person-job fit (viz., First Year Tutors are selected on their approachability and capacity to establish effective, supportive working relationships with students). Secondly, tutors are *positioned as partners* in the collective enterprise of engaging and retaining students and as such are invited to the core business of the School as a whole and not just their little patch. Thirdly their training emphasises the key idea of *facilitating student transition and success*. Thus for example, knowledge of the school Student Engagement plan, the senses of success framework, risk factors for commencing students and the designing tutorials to build a learning community. In addition to front-end preparatory training tutors are also involved across the semester in debriefing, observation and feedback on their teaching practice and use of systematic formative (first tutorial and mid-semester) and summative (end of semester) teaching evaluation. The *effectiveness* of this systemic strategy is indicated by: positive feedback from tutors on the value of the training; an absence of student complaints about tutors since implementing the intervention; very strong student evaluations of the task and relationship effectiveness (range from 5.5 to 6.3/7) of early community-building tutorials, staff-student relationships (range from 5.5 to 6.3/7); and strong end of semester teaching evaluations for all tutors (5.6 to 6.4/7) (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008b).

Managing Attendance Not all students start their academic life full of enthusiasm, in fact, some never start at all. Two non-engagement or early attrition profiles are evident:

- Students who are enrolled in a degree program but for a range of reasons have *no intention of attending*, and are unaware that they are incurring a HECS debt and risking an academic failure record; and
- Students who are enrolled and intend to pursue their studies, but are “*poor attenders*”.

These are good examples of students who would benefit from secondary prevention strategies (viz., addressing an emerging vulnerability). The challenge is of course that both these types of at-risk students are ‘under the radar’. Intervention requires their *reliable identification* through standard procedures (viz., maintaining attendance rolls for tutorials in all core courses), and the acceptance of *risk markers* or thresholds (viz., non-attendance at the first two weeks of tutorials). We have found that *sensitive outreach* (usually a phone call) to these students helps to achieve one of two outcomes: facilitating their withdrawal prior to the HECS Census date (enabling informed choice rather than avoidance); or increasing their attendance (encouraging engagement and time on task). As a result of this intervention we have consistently found over a period of three years (2007-9) that approximately 3% of the commencing cohort have withdrawn without penalty or debt (prior to HECS census), and , on average, 10-12% of the commencing cohort increased their attendance.

First Assessment Intervention for at-risk students We know that an unexpected result on the first assessment item can be a “make or break” experience. Students imbue these milestones with both practical (Can I do this?) and symbolic (Am I meant to be here?) significance, with consequences for their persistence or attrition (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). However given the ubiquitous paradox of help-seeking (viz., students that most need help are least likely to seek it) academic recovery may commonly require an approach akin to what is commonly termed intrusive advising (Earl, 2006). Our First-Assessment First-Feedback intervention (Lizzio & Wilson, 2007; Wilson & Lizzio, 2008a) involves contacting students who failed or near failed their first piece of university assessment and inviting their participation in a voluntary reflective process (viz., completing a self-directed workbook designed to assist them to identify the reasons for their assessment result; followed by an individual structured session with their tutor; leading to an action plan designed to aid the student to recover academically; and follow-up by tutors). Given the aforementioned paradox of help-seeking, and the voluntary nature of participation, the response rates are usually modest (approximately 30-40% of those invited). However, for those at-risk students who did participate there was strong evidence of improved persistence (90% of students who participated in the intervention submitted their next piece of assessment compared to a base submission rate of 78% of comparable students who were offered the intervention and did not participate); academic success (100% of students who participated passed their next piece of assessment compared to a base pass rate of 77% of students of comparable academic standard); and overall academic success, with 60% of students who participated in the intervention passing the course compared to only 24% in the non-intervention comparison group.

4.2 Co-curricular Strategies

Early Student Engagement The notion of the student lifecycle sensitizes us to the fact that the process of student engagement starts well before orientation week. Students progressively form expectations, develop misconceptions, consider aspirations and generate anxiety and excitement at various stages of their journey towards and into higher education. Thus we have many opportunities to positively influence this journey. The constraints on actively ‘reaching out’ to students before they physically arrive on campus are relatively obvious, but decreasing

in an increasingly online contact environment. However, I am still a firm believer in the potentially more substantial impact of traditional forms of contact prior to orientation week: a *letter in the mail* and the opportunity for *face to face contact*. It's one thing to receive generic correspondence from the university and quite another to receive a signed letter of welcome, an invitation to seek help and attend pre-semester workshops, and a customised local information pack from your future school or degree program. We routinely underestimate the challenges that students face 'getting into uni'. Entry tasks that seem mundane to the initiated such as enrolling, working out timetables and choosing electives are often mountainous to the new kids on the block.

Establishing a pre-orientation drop-in *academic advising centre* (called Enrolment Day (E-Day) has paid significant dividends. We had assumed that only a minority of students would require this level of assistance, however approximately 20% of the commencing cohort attended. This early-assistance strategy was not at the expense of the subsequent orientation week activities, quite the opposite, with substantial increases in student attendance at Orientation Day (up from 50% prior to the implementation of these interventions to 80%).

Managed Transition/Orientation Process The student lifecycle framework encourages us to think beyond traditional and passive notions of front-end orientation to more comprehensive and active processes of 'facilitating transition'. The key idea is that building student engagement requires "an ongoing process" not just an "orientation event". The key aspects of this strategy involve a substantive school-based Orientation Day program in the week prior to semester, followed by an ongoing within-semester transition process (Academic Success Program). The *Orientation Day* program is aimed at *building student capacity* across the five senses of success within the overarching idea that achieving success is a *shared responsibility*. Staff-student and student-student relationship connections are initiated through meeting first year staff, and spending time with peer mentors in small groups. Resourcefulness is encouraged by an introductory getting on-line session. Purpose is addressed by placing studying and getting a degree in the broader context of personal and professional life enhancement. Capability is facilitated through a presentation and discussion of enablers of, and risks to, academic success in first year.

The ongoing orientation process (*Academic Success Program*) is designed as a progressive (one hour a week) whole-cohort session over the first seven week of the first, and three weeks of second semester. This process is a structured just-in-time sequence of topics which parallels the expected development of both generic (e.g., literature searches) and discipline-specific academic skills (e.g., referencing), and core types of assessment requirements in core courses/subjects (e.g., multiple choice exams, essays, laboratory reports etc.). In addition to the scheduled topics there are also open-ended predictable opportunities for contact and advising between the staff and students. The idea of 'opportunistic advising' seems to fit well with the help-seeking behaviours of students. We find that where students will generally not individually seek out staff during their scheduled consultation times, they will do so as part of this more informal and collective process. More broadly, this speaks to the need for academic programs to develop a suite of advising modes (both formal and informal, individual and collective) to facilitate problem solving and information sharing across the student cohort. The effectiveness of our Academic Success Program is indicated by reasonable levels of student participation (approx 70% student attendance), and high positive student ratings (mean of 5.8/7).

Priming Student-Self Regulation Much of the controversy about whether it is best to challenge or support students misses the fundamental point that successful student transition to university depends on their capacity to master the meta-skill of self-management. This is supported by a range of findings (Pintrich, 1999) that places self-regulation as being particularly required at times of change, stress or transition. We should be less concerned about whether we are ‘being supportive’ and more concerned about how our approaches help or hinder students to become increasingly self-regulating. We employ a number of strategies to prime student self-regulation:

- Providing students with *evidence-based information* about the predictors of student success
- Establishing an expectation of *mutual responsibility*.
- Establishing that there is a *safety net* in place that will support them as they learn new behaviours
- Inviting students to *identify* personally relevant issues and to *commit* to personally appropriate strategies.

There is no doubt that students readily ‘get the difference’ between being told to be independent and being helped to be self-regulating. They report feeling patronised by the former and encouraged (but anxious) about the latter. In the final analysis they are influenced by, and respond to, the contingencies and expectations of our learning environments more than the rhetoric of our attempts at motivation.

Peer Mentoring Thinking systemically about transition leads us to the question of *underutilised capacity*, that is, asking ourselves the question: what goal-relevant resources are we not making the best use of? The answer more often than not is ‘students’. Senior students are potent contributors and partners in the community building process. We know from research that peer mentoring is effective in not only assisting students to connect and engage, but also to be more successful academically (Muckert, Wilson & Lizzio, 1998). A systems approach to peer-mentoring also invites us to think laterally about a broader range of potential roles for student mentors in facilitating transition and self-regulation. Thus student mentors can add value by being:

- Problem solvers (let’s discuss the options)
- Referrers (the best person to talk to is)
- Supporters and listeners (how’s it going?)
- Translators (this is what they mean)
- Normalisers (this is a fairly normal experience)
- intelligence gatherers (this is a recurring issue)
- interventionists/change agents (what would make a difference for students is)

In order to achieve this ‘increased capacity’ we position our senior student as partners in the process and link them to other key roles (such as first-year tutors). The mentoring program is formally designed to run as a front-loaded intervention across the first half of semester, but informal contact is often subsequently maintained between mentors and mentees. The success of this approach to peer mentoring program is indicated by: high evaluations of program effectiveness by first year students (4.5/5); high participation levels by senior students as mentors (approximately 60-80 each year); high return participation rates by mentors (range of 66% to 82%).

Early Vocational Focus Students’ engagement and persistence is, to a considerable extent, a function of whether they can make the connection between ‘what they are doing’ and where it might take them’. The key proposition here is that we not only have responsibility to educate

but also to establish the meaning and relevance of what we are ask our student to do. Early discussions about vocational outcomes and career pathways can activate motivational resources in students around the exciting idea of ‘building ones’ future’. Importantly, motivation is a requirement for self-regulation. In this regard, simple processes make strong contributions. We have found a mid-first semester *Career Development Workshop*, facilitated by Student Services staff, to lay an effective generic foundation. We then follow this up with a (usually early in second semester) with a specific program *Learning about My Profession Program (LAMP)* which provides students with an early opportunity to experience the narratives and journeys of both recent graduates and leaders in their field. Student feedback indicates strong support for the value of this program. Students reported (on a 7-point scale) that they considered the undergraduate program to be more relevant and interesting (4.5 v 5.7), to contribute more to their professional development (4.71 v 5.91), and to be better value for money (4.42 v 5.53) with this program being offered.

Student Governance There is considerable evidence that students are more likely to identify with and contribute to a school where they feel respected and treated fairly by staff and provided with fair opportunities to have a voice (Lizzio, Wilson & Hadaway, 2007). Thus, actively positioning students in School structures and processes as members of a learning community, and as contributors to governance is not just a ‘feel good exercise’ but a practically useful intervention in school culture. One way we have approached this has been the establishment of an *Undergraduate Student Council*, containing a representative slice of staff and students from years one through to four. The Council meets twice a semester, and provides a forum for both system’s problem-solving, as well as positive development and encouragement of student “voice” and leadership. Our experience shows us that students bring real concerns and problems related to teaching, assessment standards and quality, and staff behaviour. Of course leadership and modelling of respectful inquiry by academic staff are essential to the credibility, safety and success or otherwise of such processes. Indicators that the ‘settings are right’ are high numbers of first year students volunteering to participate; high attendance rates at meetings; and positive feedback from students from all years that they feel “heard” and “empowered” within the School.

5. Monitoring and Feedback

Listen to the words of the critic. S/he reveals what your friends hide form you...but do not be weighed down by what the critic says. No statue was ever erected to house a critic.
Statues are for the criticised. (Anthony de Mello)

If we are in the business of long-term cultural change then we need to be concerned not only with the impact of our interventions, but also the effort and resources they require. The dual goals of *effectiveness* (What works?) and *sustainability* (What can we reasonably continue to do?) are equally important. There is an urgent need to interrupt the recurring pattern of short-term innovations which rely on the enthusiasm of champions and which also rapidly decline when their energy is depleted. We need to use data from multiple sources to make decisions about the cost-benefit ratio of things that we do and their return-on-investment. The strategy of bootstrap innovation (viz., let’s try this and see what happens) has I think served us well in the early stages, but we now know enough to use more considered approaches to driving change. The alternative is to continue to reinvent the wheel and feel increasingly tired doing it.

I think it is important not be precious about data. Useful information comes from multiple formal and informal sources of feedback. Example of readily available, low-cost and easy to interrogate data include:

- Student feedback
- Partner feedback (e.g., mentors, tutors)
- Staff feedback (e.g., convenors, tutors, administration);
- Institutional surveys (e.g., Starting@Griffith benchmark survey)
- Course evaluations
- Student outcomes (e.g., submission and pass rates for assessment items)
- Informal and incidental observations, conversations

However, as we all know data only become useful information if we engage in reflection and are willing to non-defensively examine it's implications for our practice.

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