REMOVING DOOR
Issues of Student Retention and Persistence

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**Revolving Door: Issues of Student Retention and Persistence**  
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What attracts and makes students stay at the University of Utah? Maybe it is a particular individual, a professor, a fellow athlete, a coach, or a member of a club. Or maybe it is a departmental offering, a program, a class, a major, or a lecture series. In other words, is recruiting and retention about helping students find someone or something to identify with, or both?

Students and faculty who were interviewed on campus said student involvement is an important aspect to retain students throughout their undergraduate years at the U. Having different clubs, organizations and events allow students to get involved in the school, as does the feeling of acceptance arising from relationships established between instructors and students, which aids in student self-identification throughout a student’s college career.

“Students who get involved and are able to create an identity on campus are more likely to stay the whole time because as an undergraduate the social aspect is just as important as the academic,” said Kari Ellingson, the assistant vice president of student affairs at the U. She said these experiences prepare students for the world outside of the U, because employers look for well-rounded individuals.

Crystal Flynn, a senior at the U, joined several different groups on campus during her undergraduate years. The groups included the Pre-Med Honor Society, the Lesbian and Gay Student Union (LGSU), the Student Advisory Committee, and the Retention Promotion Tenure Committee (RPT). Flynn believes that every group which she was a part of has helped shape who she is today.

The goal of helping students find someone and something to identify with on campus begins early in students’ careers, often even before they enroll at the U. High school students are invited to campus at different times during the academic year for different conferences and events. In the fall, James Fisher, an assistant professor in the communication department, held the 65th annual Utah High School Writers and Photographers Clinic for high school students from all over Utah.

The students participated in workshops and listened to Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff speak. At the event, students were able to indulge in workshops that increased their knowledge. They were able to interact with each other and those helping out. One year, Fisher said, he recruited three students to the department of communication who made an impression on him when they challenged the speaker. “The reason for the clinic is to recruit the best and most articulate students from in-state [high] schools to stay in-state,” Fisher said.
Another event that took place last fall was the high school conference organized by Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/as de Aztlan (M.E.Ch.A.), a Mexican-American “Chicano” group that is politically aware and active on campus. During this one day event, Chicano/a high school students listened to a keynote speaker and attended workshops conducted by community leaders, elected officials and other prominent figures in the Chicano community. The event covered several different topics of what to expect when they begin their college endeavor. Many of their workshops consisted of political issues, which formed into a large discussion on one important issue in the Latino/Chicano community: Immigration. Ellingson said, “It is important to get students’ minds working, especially with topics they are interested in.”

The purpose of the event put on by M.E.Ch.A is not just to recruit students to the U. but hopefully to recruit students to become a part of M.E.Ch.A and retain them throughout their college years. Yullian Novoa, a student at the U and member of M.E.C.H.A, was one of the students who took charge of the event, along side with Chris Macia and Richard Diaz. Novoa said that being a part of M.E.Ch.A “is a support group, we help each other out, it is a really good way of networking.”

A new program called “Adelante” that began last year, translated as “Ahead,” provides kindergarteners and first graders the opportunity to visit the U. The 5 to 7-year-olds are brought to campus four times throughout the year and are immersed into the world of higher education. “It has been a positive experience seeing the children’s reaction to their visits,” said Maria Martinez, coordinator of campus visits for the children.

“What attracts and makes students stay at the University of Utah? Maybe it is a particular individual, a professor, a fellow athlete, a coach, or a member of a club. Or maybe it is a departmental offering, a program, a class, a major, or a lecture series.”

“Events that expose the U. to younger students can be seen as an early form of recruiting,” said Liz Leckie, the Assistant Dean in the College of Humanities.

Involving parents in the recruitment process makes it more inclusive. “Recruiting is also about informing the parents,” Leckie said. There are many cultures where the family is connected to the student, and they need and want to be educated in the process, she said. “If anything, the university needs to look at recruiting through a broader spectrum of more than just the student,” Leckie said.

Suzanne Espinoza and Mateo Remsburg, the director and assistant director for Student Recruitment and High School Services, pointed out different services available to students. Through this office, prospective students and their parents are able to visit campus and participate in a one day “Information Session,” which provides necessary information about coming to the U.

There is also a student “Host Program” that gives prospective students the opportunity to stay overnight in the residence halls and attend an information session. Having the option to visit and stay at the U gives prospective students and their parents a taste of student life on campus, both socially and academically.

In the 2005-2006 school year, 855 prospective freshman students participated in the Information Session, 396 filled out admissions applications and 201 enrolled, according to a packet entitled, “Highlights from the Student Recruitment and High School Services.” In the Host Program, 293 students participated, 205 applied, 194 were admitted and 124 enrolled, according to “Highlights.”
In the process of recruiting, it is important to get information out to students and parents early so they know what they need to do, Leckie said. “One office can not do it alone. We all have to be involved in student recruitment and retention,” she said.

Every student who is accepted to the U for the fall semester is required to attend a campus orientation during the summer to familiarize them with the U. During the summer orientation in 2006, there were just over 500 students who attended, said Gwen Fears, the director of Orientation and New Student Programs. This upcoming summer she hopes there will be 800 to 900 students, and her goal is to focus on helping new students interact and form bonds with each other.

Fears said that in the fall of 2006, orientation had 7.4 percent of students who matriculated through an orientation but ended up not attending the U. She said she contacted those students to find out why.

The students who ended up not attending were choosing from more than one university, experiencing financial hardship, or were deciding to wait another semester, said Fears. “There is not a single pattern of why students don’t matriculate, which makes it hard to fix,” she said.

Making connection with students through recruitment and forming these connections into relationships may be the key to retaining students. Students, who are able to find a place on campus, feel more apt to allow themselves to grow, as Novoa and Flynn explained. Leckie felt that one of the best ways to retain students is by making connections with them and building relationships. She advised students not only inside the College of Humanities, but outside as well. She also attended major expos and works with the orientation office. “When students know what is available and where to go to get help, it helps with retention,” said Leckie. “You shouldn’t lose students because of frustration or financial reasons… there needs to be a good reason.”

The solutions could be by students finding their place on campus through sport teams, debate teams, circles of friends that were formed freshmen year in dorms or any student group available to students on campus. Having the chance to try out and experience what is available at the U, makes a college experience memorable.

As part of their recruitment and retention efforts, the College of Humanities plans on going to Salt Lake Community College to speak to potential transfer students about the U.

One such transfer student, Kiyomi Bolick, a senior at the U who transferred from Utah Valley in 2005, said, “I transferred to the university because of the strong debate program they have.” Bolick said one of the things that keeps her here at the U is being a part of the debate team, which allowed her to meet individuals she normally wouldn’t have met outside of her classes and Chris Macias, a sophomore at the U studying History and documentary studies and a member of M.E.Ch.A, agreed.

“Making connection with students through recruitment and forming these connections into relationships may be the key to retaining students.”

“It’s like being part of a family on campus,” he said.
While it is more typical for parents to send their kids off to college, during my sophomore year, I brought my mom to school with me.

My mom, Kristine Dobson, 53, returned to the University of Utah in 2004 to finish her doctorate degree in educational psychology. She attends school part-time, works full-time, and still makes sure I do my homework. She is one of the non-traditional students at the U.

According to the University of Utah Admissions Office, a non-traditional student is one who has been out of high school for seven years or more, and has no prior college experience. However, around campus, it can be almost anyone.

“So many people just don’t define themselves as non-traditional students,” said Linda Sabrowski, administrative assistant for the U’s Women’s Resource Center.

My view of a non-traditional student is influenced by my mom. I collected data for this story on students who were seven years out of high school but who may or may not be new to college. I chose this group because I feel that a non-traditional student can be one who is new to college.

The Office of Budget & Institutional Analysis has data for non-traditional students, as defined by the previous definition. They have data from 1999-2001, the number of non-traditional students here increased every year. In 2001 the increased rate of non-traditional students was 165. However, this is only about 1 percent of the student body, so there are probably many more non-traditional students unaccounted for.

The mean age for a non-traditional student at the U was 35 for all three years. For all undergraduate students on campus, the mean age was 24.

Brandy Arnott, 33, is a sophomore attending the U. She returned to school when she couldn’t find a good-paying job without a degree. She noticed this happening mostly in the last six to seven years. Most students attend college because they want a better paying job, and those jobs usually require a degree.

Arnott said she was getting paid less than when she first started working. She found that people with life experience but no degree were paid less than people with a degree, regardless of experience.

“I was tired of getting the same jobs over and over again,” Arnott said.

My mom was close to finishing her doctorate degree
21 years ago, around the time I was born, but now she wants to complete it, although this time not for career advancement. “It’s more of a personal goal,” she said.

Reasons for returning to school can differ depending on women or men, according to Sandy McLelland, scholastic standards coordinator of the University College Advising. McLelland was a non-traditional student and now advises traditional and non-traditional students.

Women may take a break to start a family, and like my mom, may return because of the “empty nest syndrome,” when children leave the home. However, from McLelland’s perspective, this can be a reason for men to return too. “They have to do something with their time,” McLelland said. McLelland also said that men and women may also return because they want to have a career rather than a job.

Many people in Utah also serve two-year missions for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Even if they start college before they leave, they don’t return for two years or more.

McLelland said most non-traditional students return to college because they want a better-paying job. McLelland went to college for a year and a half after she graduated from high school, and then took a 17-year break. She got her bachelor’s degree in human development and a master’s in special education, both from the U.

Arnott went to college for about two and a half years after high school, but dropped out as a sophomore for financial reasons. She was working a full-time job while going to school, and her family couldn’t afford to help pay tuition.

Now, after 13 years, and with her husband’s support, she is back. “I get to enjoy it this time,” Arnott said. “School is my full-time job.”

Arnott is probably one of the few students who get to focus solely on school. Most non-traditional students are working part time or full time.

Sabrowski said probably 75 percent of non-traditional students work full time. This limits how many credits they can take without being overloaded.

“The majority do not go [to school] full time,” Mclelland said. Full time would be 12 credit hours or more.

Non-traditional students not only have to balance work and school, but also their social lives, especially if they have a family. “Most non-traditional students are trying to do a lot more balancing between their personal lives and needing to work,” Dobson said.

McLelland said non-traditional students are usually better at managing their time. “I don’t think [non-traditional
students] have any more time than traditional students,” McLelland said.

Many non-traditional students have challenges that a traditional student would not. Some challenges non-traditional students might have would be the birth of a child, children getting sick, and having to take care of elderly parents, Sabrowski said.

Ronald Yaros, Ph.D and Assistant Professor in the department of communication, said non-traditional students’ schedules are the number one problem. He said most non-traditional students commute to the U and may have conflicts with their work schedules.

Yaros himself was a non-traditional student at Wisconsin-Madison University. He said it was difficult because no one really wanted to hear about his experiences. “It was challenging for me because in some cases I was older than my professors,” he said.

He said his experience as a non-traditional student helped him to welcome them in his own classroom. “I am particularly sensitive to the adult learner,” Yaros said.

Arnott said it is hard when most students are younger than her, but she took a freshman seminar that helped her get back on track. She also said it helped her become more involved in school and know what’s happening on campus. Arnott said her second time around is a “totally different experience” because of the support she receives from her husband and others.

“It’s amazing,” Arnott said. “I love it.”

Non-traditional students have somewhat of a reputation for taking school more seriously. The benefit of having non-traditional students in class is maturity, Yaros said.

“[Non-traditional students] appreciate education a lot more overall than traditional students,” McLelland said. “GPA’s are really important to them,” Sabrowski said.

Arnott said that she is definitely more dedicated to school now than she was the first time. “This time, I’m here because I want to be,” she said.

However, just as traditional students may need financial assistance, non-traditional students are no exception.

“It'd be a luxury to just go to school [without working],” Dobson said. “But I can’t afford it.”

Sabrowski said money is a problem for many non-traditional students. The Women’s Resource Center offers about 43 scholarships. “Most of our scholarships have been for non-traditional students,” she said.

And although it’s called the Women’s Resource Center, they do a lot for men as well.

“Our scholarships are open to men,” Sabrowski said. “They just have to apply.”

Everyone faces challenges in college. Non-traditional students are especially willing to take on those challenges in pursuing their education. These students are persistent in their educational goals. They’ve started or returned to school to accomplish something, and their persistence shows they have the will to do it. They are focused and dedicated. They are a diverse and an important voice in the classroom and a great benefit to the U.

For professors, advisors, and other students, it’s important to recognize the challenges these non-traditional students face, according to McLelland and others. We need to make sure we support these students and their educational goals so that their short-term frustrations don’t get in the way of their long-term goals, according to Dobson. By learning about this population of students I have become more aware of the obstacles they face and I hope to encourage my mom and other non-traditional students in their quest to finish school successfully.
Students face unique challenges during the transitions between high school and college, and between the freshman and sophomore years. While some are able to overcome these obstacles, many students drop out of college during the first year. This leads to the question that arises repeatedly in the minds of college administrators and instructors: What exactly are the challenges that affect a student's decision to return after the freshman year?

While some students drop out of college due to the financial or academic inability to remain in school, a significant portion of college students make the decision based on one influential non-academic factor: the personal desire to complete college. The level of aspiration, which is based on factors such as negative college perceptions and personal issues, plays a significant role in low student retention rates for first-year students. In fact, statistics from the University of Utah's Office of Budget and Institutional Analysis (OBIA) indicate that the most significant dropout rates at the U occur during the first to second year of school. Students are dropping out of school before any significant amount of tuition and fees have been paid, and before academic factors prevent them from continuing in school.

According to the OBIA, the 2005-2006 retention rate for first year students was 82 percent. Although that is only a slight decrease from the 2004-2005 retention rate of 83 percent, the data still indicates that a significant number of freshmen are leaving the U, either by transferring to other schools, or dropping out of college completely. So what exactly is causing 18 percent of freshmen to drop out of the U?

For some students, college is not an opportunity, but a burden of expectation from parents and society. Adam Mckee, a junior at the U, expresses a sentiment shared by many other young adults: “I think over the years it has become almost expected by society that kids graduating high school attend college. I think many are not ready, or are not interested, yet feel the pressure to attend and once they struggle through a few semesters realize college is not for them,” he said.

According to a 2005 survey conducted by the OBIA, approximately 36 percent of incoming freshmen at the U claimed that parents and relatives were a major reason for attending college, while almost 7 percent claimed that they had nothing better to do at the time. Lauren M. Weitzman, the director of the University Counseling Center, said that she frequently encounters students who are unsure of their own desires to attend college, and are therefore more susceptible to dropping out in the face of minor obstacles. “Many students feel pressured to attend
college or to major in a particular field. I think college should be a time of exploration. I think students can do themselves a disservice if they prematurely foreclose on their options and don’t take advantage of learning new things at college,” she said.

The decreasing trend in college attendance rates in Utah and across the nation also indicates the changing perception of college. A study conducted by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research shows that Utah experienced a 4 percent decrease in its 18 to 24-year-old student population between the years 1990 and 2000, and it’s not an isolated trend. National percentages are also declining, from 34.4 percent in 1990, to 34 percent in 2000.

Mckee noted that many young adults see college as a sacrifice that doesn’t always pay off: “Attending college guarantees nothing. There are many people who have graduated from college but are still stuck at jobs that anyone with a high school diploma could obtain. I think it gives you an advantage in the workplace but it is by no means a ticket to success,” he said. Mckee’s statements reflected a student’s perception of the value of a college degree.

His thoughts are echoed by many young adults who simply don’t see the point in sacrificing time and money with no guarantee for results. These perceptions can have a detrimental impact on dropout rates, since the sole purpose of college for most students is future career success. Steve Risano, a sophomore at the U, said that without certainty that his degree will secure a future job, college would be pointless: “I don’t actually enjoy going to college very much. It seems more like a stepping stone I must complete to be successful,” he said.
In order to see the value of a degree, students need to be aware of its positive impact on future job opportunities. College degree holders are rewarded with long-term payoffs including a broader range of career choices, higher incomes, promotion opportunities and lower unemployment rates. A degree also provides the opportunity for personal growth and discovery. Several studies provide evidence for the advantages of a college education.

According to a 2006 study conducted by College Board, the median income of college graduates is 63 percent more than those who only earn high school diplomas. Another study conducted by the Occupational Outlook Quarterly indicates that in the year 2000, the unemployment rate for adults with a college degree was less than 1 percent, while adults with only a high school degree had an unemployment rate of 3.5 percent.

Negative college perceptions also help to explain why first generation students are at higher risks for dropping out. According to a study by Research in Higher Education, the dropout risk for students whose parents did not attend college is 71 percent higher than for students whose parents both attended college. Without the evidence of the benefits of college and the support of families familiar with the college process and environment, graduating can be more challenging.

For other first year students, personal issues can lead to stress and depression, which can put them at risk for dropping out of school. According to the University of Utah Counseling Center’s 2005-2006 Annual Report, 45.5 percent of students who visited the counseling center reported that the issue they were seeking counseling for substantially or severely affected their academic performance. Weitzman explained, “If a student is feeling isolated and disconnected from campus they may drop out. Depression and loneliness are very real factors that students struggle with and if they can’t get help or support they are at risk.”

The University Counseling Center effectively treats a wide range of emotional and physical issues to assist students and avoid student drop-outs. During the college transition, freshmen students are more sensitive to loneliness, stress and depression, which can adversely affect students’ motivation. Studies indicate that the center helps students deal with personal issues, which can help students at high risks for dropping out of school.

The counseling center’s report reveals that 49 percent of student clients agree or strongly agree that counseling has helped them remain at the U, and 83 percent claim that counseling helps to enhance their experience at the U. Unfortunately, students who need counseling are difficult to identify, and as Risano explained, many first year students are reluctant to seek help themselves: “During my first year of college, I was pretty shy. It was hard enough talking to my classmates and neighbors, much less a counselor,” he said.

Although freshmen students are the most vulnerable to dropping out, the counseling center’s report shows that they only account for 8.8 percent of counseling clients, the lowest percentage of any other grade level. Weitzman speculated that students’ lack of information may account for drop-outs due to personal issues: “Freshman students are often unaware of the resources
available to help them and may be less comfortable talking with professors about what they are struggling with. Their relative lack of experience may make the challenges they face feel insurmountable,” she said.

One of the most prominent issues for students who seek counseling is depression, a condition that new students are more likely to face during the transition to college. Adapting to a new environment while struggling to meet new friends can be intimidating for incoming students, particularly if they are homesick.

In a study conducted by the American College Testing (ACT), non-academic factors such as faculty support and student self-concept have a positive correlation with retention. In 2003, another College Student Journal study concluded that social support is a significant predictor of persistence. Students are more likely to continue attending a university where they have friends and are involved in campus activities. They are also more equipped to overcome obstacles when they are confident. Despite the significance of these factors, an OBIA survey demonstrates that more than 22 percent of students claimed that the U had little or no impact on social growth and adaptation.

The key to increasing freshmen retention rates is to increase student awareness regarding the potential issues they may face during the transition to college and resources available to them. As Weitzman explained, “Talking to students, focus groups, collecting more data are all options. More universities are trying to identify students at risk up front and then providing what’s called ‘intrusive’ strategies such as sending postcards directly to students about resources they may benefit from. We haven’t done this here yet but may be considering it.” Informing students of the benefits of a college degree and helping them develop goals also increase the motivation to complete college. Weitzman describes some of the options: “Alumni and students talking to students. Sharing data. We also teach a Strategies for College Success class and a Career Exploration class, which are ways students can improve their learning and adjustment to college and think about good career options for themselves. We also have the ASUU Tutoring Center and Supplemental Instruction program (peer-led group tutoring in selected classes). I think the programs are there, it’s just a matter of helping students find out about them,” she said.

According to Dr. Alan Seidman, the executive director of the Center for the Study of College Student Retention (CSCSR), student retention is also the responsibility of faculty and staff. Seidman’s “Retention Formula” emphasizes the early identification and intervention of students that are at risk. He explained that if the faculty becomes familiar with students, characteristics such as absences, tardiness, grades and class participation can be used to identify students at risk. With early intervention, assistance such as counseling and tutoring can be implemented before students drop out.

Although college provides many obstacles for first year students, those who successfully adjust feel that the benefits of college outweigh the sacrifices. Emily Crane, a senior at the U, explained that the college experience is an important step for many young adults: “College is worth your time and effort. A person learns so much about themselves, especially if they attend an out-of-state school and they are fresh out of high school,” she said.
As I’ve read through some of the articles in this issue, I’ve seen a common theme: several writers suggest that one of the reasons students fail to persist to a degree is because they don’t feel connected to the institution and their learning. As I’ve worked at the Center for Teaching & Learning Excellence, it has become clear to me that, in general, students are more likely to enjoy and continue with their learning experience if they get a sense that:

1) the teacher cares and
2) they are connected to their peers in a learning community.

I’d like to take a moment to suggest simple ways that the average instructor could treat this need for connection in an area where instructors have the most control: the classroom.

**General Tips for Creating a Classroom Community:**

- Create activities, from the beginning, that help students to get to know each other.
- Have groups of students exchange contact information during the first week.
- Try to learn the names of your students and remember something unique about them.
- Express your openness for questions or viewpoints and express appreciation for all questions asked or viewpoints given.
- Whenever possible, connect course content to the lives of students and their interests.
- Through formal and/or informal activities, give time for students to reflect together on the material.
- Make sure that all students get a chance to be heard.
- Be aware of stereotypes or remarks that might disparage any groups and kindly correct those who might make use of them.
- Use a variety of course materials and activities that can engage different learners and diverse viewpoints.
Tips for Large-Enrollment Courses:

Students in large-enrollment courses often feel lost, nameless, and afraid to ask the questions that could best help them understand the material. It is difficult for instructors in these courses to make that personal contact with each student. Unfortunately, these courses are often taken early in an academic career, so freshmen and sophomores struggle most to find their niche.

Here are a few more ideas to help create a community-style atmosphere in a large-enrollment classroom:

- While lecturing, walk around the room, up the stairs and through the aisles, so that all students can benefit from some sort of proximity to you as the instructor.

- After a lecture, ask students to write down the one point that they still don’t understand (muddiest point) on a small 3 X 5 card and turn it in to you. You can quickly review these cards after class and then clarify major issues during the next class. This can also be done in groups.

- Before starting a lecture, ask students to brainstorm questions they have about the topic so that you can answer the questions during your presentation.

- Ask thoughtful questions regarding the material and have students turn to each other and respond before calling on someone to respond in front of the class.

Tips for Seminar-style Courses:

In her book Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, bell hooks (1994) wrote:

*I still remember the excitement I felt when I took my first class where the teacher wanted to change how we sat, where we moved from sitting in rows to a circle where we could look at one another. That change forced us to recognize one another’s presence (p.146).*

This method hooks’ teacher used to get students to see each other’s “presence” and interact in a critical dialogue can be very useful to instructors and students because it inspires learning and works great for smaller, seminar-style courses.

Tips for Online Courses:

Although technically online courses are “connected,” being connected is often the last thing students feel in an online course.

Here are some tips for giving your online courses a feeling of community:

- Create discussion groups where students can ask questions of peers and receive responses with oversight from you as an instructor.

- Hold real-time office hours where students can contact you by e-mail for immediate responses to questions.

- If location permits, hold one physical class meeting so that students can get to know each other.

- Give weekly reports on what is expected of the students.

Although the problem of retention is not easily remedied, creating a friendly, collaborative classroom community can help students to forge those connections that will give them the will to stay. If you would like resources or more techniques for making a classroom become a learning community, please contact us at the Center for Teaching & Learning Excellence, 581-7597.
When people think of college students, they often picture 20-year-old single students who take notes in class during the day and become party animals at night. For most non-traditional students, however, this type of college experience is either a thing of the past or merely a stereotype portrayed in teen movies.

Some students attempt to obtain a degree while still working 40 hours a week. Others may decide to get married and start a family before graduating. Whatever the case, many students have non-traditional responsibilities that prevent them from being able to have a normal school schedule.

As a commuter school, the University of Utah attracts non-traditional students from home and abroad. Because this group of students is becoming more prevalent on campus, it is necessary for the administration -- as well as individual schools and departments -- to determine the needs of the students and provide educational resources that will assure their retention.

For non-traditional students with obligations during the day such as work and family, night classes provide an avenue to furthering their education without interrupting their schedules. For the spring 2007 semester, students chose from more than 300 night classes beginning between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. offered by various departments, according to the U’s spring class schedule.

Although this number may seem substantial, it fails to show the inconsistencies in the number of classes offered by individual departments. For example, departments such as economics and special education offer more than 40 night classes each semester. Others such as Aerospace Studies and Pediatrics, however, offer none at all, making it difficult for some non-traditional students to work classes into their schedules.

This is a problem that Ann Richardson often faces as a 37-year-old non-traditional student. Richardson took a break from school several years ago after receiving an associate degree of general education from Salt Lake Community College. “I couldn’t find balance between school and my personal life,” she explained.

Taking night classes now helps her find that balance and allows her to work and spend time with her family while still pursuing her educational goals. “I wanted to get my bachelor’s degree in something I really loved: English,”
she said. “I needed to change my life and upgrade my career through education.”

For spring 2007, Richardson chose from a list of eight night classes in the English department, and like many non-traditional students, she wishes that the U offered more. “People are always trying to increase their opportunities, and night school allows students to get a quality education from a state accredited school,” said Richardson. “There is a huge need for continuing education in the Salt Lake Valley, and the University of Utah should take this opportunity to serve the community and accommodate their students.”

However, the question for U administrators is: how should departments determine the number and types of classes they should offer to satisfy this need? Richardson suggested that “in order to accommodate non-traditional students, it is important to try to survey as much as possible and study majors to see which are most in need of flexibility with night classes.”

This is exactly what the English department is attempting to do, according to Janet Hough, the academic program support specialist for English. The department watches enrollment patterns for the classes they offer each semester and tries to offer classes that will satisfy the needs of students, Hough explained. “Although English is traditionally a day program, we try to offer a variety of classes at night that would ideally allow students to get a degree solely from taking night classes,” said Hough. “We recognize that there is that constituency of students who want night classes, and we are constantly trying to better serve the needs of these non-traditional students.”

Many students do not understand the complexities involved in scheduling, however, and departments face many challenges in trying to provide more night classes. For example, to hold a particular course in the evening, a professor must be willing to teach a night class, and it is often difficult to find someone willing. Hough explained that many of the faculty members in the English department have families and are unable to teach in the evenings. Others simply feel they teach better during the day and prefer not to teach at night. “Professors, like students, have their own preferences for when they like to be in class,” said Hough. “Since we do not hire people to specifically teach night classes, it is sometimes difficult to find professors who have the desire to teach them.”

Another difficult aspect of scheduling night classes is that in many departments, most students prefer to take classes during the day and scheduling is largely based on trends from previous semesters. Louise Degn, associate chair for the department of communication, explained that previous trends are what mainly determine the amount of night classes offered in departments. “Based on our enrollment, the most popular times for classes are during the day and we schedule our classes according to that trend,” said Degn. “We will go where the students are, and for right now, this means that most of our classes will be offered during the day.”

Although it is understandable why departments base their schedules on past trends, if night classes are never offered, these trends will never change and the needs of students will continue to go unnoticed. Carl Behunin, a 27-year-old senior majoring in mass communication, has struggled with his school schedule because of the lack of night classes. “For non-traditional students, time is the biggest factor,” said Behunin. “All of the classes I need are during the day and it is so inconvenient.”

While working a full-time job during his first semester at the U, Behunin struggled to find time for school and work. “I went to work at 5:30 every morning just so I
could get enough hours in and still be able to go to class during the day,” he said. “It was exhausting and it would have been so much easier if the communication department offered night classes.”

Eventually, Behunin decided that completing his degree was his first priority and now he works part time. “Everyone has to make sacrifices in pursuit of higher education,” said Behunin. “But I often feel like the university dictates our entire lives based on the schedules that they set and it is hard for students to find a voice.”

Chuck Wight, associate vice president of instructional technology and outreach, insists that students do have a voice at the U. “Students vote with their feet,” explained Wight. “If night classes in a particular department are consistently filled, there is a better chance that they will offer more in the future.”

Wight said that if students feel that there is a need for more night classes, they should express their concerns to the department. “Students should not be bashful about making their wishes known,” he said. “Responding to the needs of students is a high priority for the administration and for departments, and students do have power to motivate change.”

According to Wight, the biggest factor in whether change occurs is whether departments are willing to listen. Many departments have made changes in their schedules based on the desires expressed by their students. For example, the David Eccles School of Business offered nearly 80 night classes for undergraduate and graduate students this spring, according to the U’s spring class schedule. The business school recognizes the high demand for night classes, said Sue Young, the academic advisor for the Professional MBA program. “We offer more night classes because that is when students want them,” said Young. “Most of our students need to increase their education in order to qualify for promotions or work their way up in their current careers, and night classes give them the freedom to work and go to school at the same time.”

Alissa Black, a senior majoring in business, said that she has never had problems finding enough night classes to accommodate her schedule. “The business program is really accommodating students who have families or work full time and still desire to finish school,” said Black. “It is possible to do nearly your entire schedule in night classes if needed.”

Black, who also served as director for the non-traditional student board of the Associated Students of the University of Utah (ASUU), recognizes the importance of night classes. “(Non-traditional students) are more likely to be balancing work and family,” said Black. “Though they may be overwhelmed by these things and shorter on time than students who don’t have as many non-traditional responsibilities, they are making the solid effort to balance their time and get school finished.”

According to Ann Richardson, providing resources that allow non-traditional students to pursue higher education will ensure their retention, and “if the University of Utah does not offer night classes, students will search other places.”

Retaining students at the college level is a problem that obviously cannot be solved easily. Because the student population at the U is so diverse and includes students with varied needs and educational goals, efforts must be made to encourage the retention of all types of students. Non-traditional students bring an element of maturity and dedication to college life which should be valued by the professors, departments and the administration. Night classes help to accommodate the lifestyles of many of these students and allow them in their educational pursuits.

The U should evaluate, recognize and listen to the needs of non-traditional students and schedule their classes accordingly. Although it may not be the ultimate solution in retention, it will encourage students like Ann Richardson to stay at the U.
The goal of this article is to help readers understand what some of the factors are that result in students’ decisions to drop out of college and what can be changed to make them stay. I am mainly arguing from schools’ perspectives; that is, since it is generally in colleges’ best interests to keep students from dropping out, I am not going to justify the ends by touching upon why it is important for students to stay in the first place. Instead, I am mainly going to focus on the means to see what goes amiss in the process. To achieve this, I am going to analyze two former University of Utah dropouts, and contrast this with my own experience to illustrate how students’ perceptions of college education can greatly affect their experiences with college, and their decision regarding staying or leaving. For this reason, to improve the retention rate of the U, I would argue one of the most important aspects the school administration needs to focus on is informing students of the value of college education, equipping them with realistic and proper expectations and attitudes.

In his article “College Pressures,” William Zinsser (1978), a distinguished writer and teacher, wrote:

What I wish for all students is some release from the clammy grip of the future. I wish them a chance to savor each segment of their education as an experience in itself and not as a grim preparation for the next step. I wish them the right to experiment, to trip and fall, to learn that defeat is as instructive as victory and is not the end of the world.

For many, college education is a long and arduous journey; the key for students to carry on and prosper in this journey is the understanding that college education is a multi-dimensional experience in itself, and its true value lies in the process rather than the outcome.

Students who understand that college education is an important part of life will spend their college years with open minds, which will enable them to better cope with adversities they may encounter in the course of higher education.

With such an understanding, students may realize that experience with college, like any other kind of experience in life, has its ups and downs, moments of joys and sorrows. No matter what kind of experience it is, it should be an indispensable part of life. Most college students are under a great amount of pressure of all kinds: financial, parental and societal pressures, and so on.
Students who see adversities as norms of life will deal with these pressures in a much more positive manner, and they will not drop out easily, just as they would not have an indifferent attitude towards life. They should understand that these vicissitudes are simply part of the journey and the pursuit of a solution is the most hopeful path.

Take me as an example. Initially, the major obstacle I faced when I was in college was my inability to adapt to the surroundings, but I adopted the view that whatever life may present is a valuable learning experience; I actively sought solutions and turned the potentially negative experience into a process for me to grow and mature.

Born and raised in China, I was accepted by one of the most prestigious universities in China—Beijing University. However, I chose to leave my cozy home and go to Hong Kong for higher education instead. Like many other freshmen, nothing went smoothly in my transition from high school to college. I was living on campus away from family and friends, and the feeling of loneliness made the start of my college life extremely difficult. I became so homesick that for several months, I spent hours over the phone with my parents every day, often with me crying on one end and my mom listening helplessly on the other.

My perspective significantly changed when I was told by my counselor, Christina Choi, that I was in fact benefiting from what college had to offer—a unique experience from which I learned to grow and become stronger. I stopped being frustrated and started to treat every challenge as an opportunity for my personal growth. Even though the negative feelings could still be overwhelming at times, I managed to remain hopeful towards my college education. I did not sit idle, waiting to be saved. I understood the only way to pass through those “dark days” quickly was to actively build a new social circle around me in which I might take comfort and seek support. I did so by replacing my initial feelings of detachment from my surroundings with the strong bonds I gradually established with my dorm mates and classmates.

Students who value college education as a multidimensional process will also pay more attention to their social development, and such a process will in turn help them establish a strong connection with college. Furthermore, students who see college education in this way will not rush for the destination and ignore the potentially beneficial resources available on both sides of the road. They might sample a great variety of courses to figure out where they fit in if they do not already have an idea beforehand; and if they already do, they might reevaluate their goal to see if that truly comes from within, or if they are simply trying to make the wishes of their parents come true.

In college, I was frequently reminded by my counselor that “teaching valuable skills and knowledge” was not the sole purpose of college education; the ultimate goal of college, my counselor said, was to help students enrich their lives by providing a platform where new ideas were tried out and various lifestyles, either academically or socially, were experienced. I took what she said to heart. During college years, I kept the time spent on my major to a minimum and spent more time exploring different fields. I was actively involved in many extra-curricular activities such as Debating team, Leadership Development Program and Martial Arts Club. My goal was not to pursue safe courses and high grades, but to make each day in college count.

Admittedly, I had my moments of frustration with either the curriculum or some of my professors. However, I was linked to the college education I had so profoundly and in multiple ways that one broken link would not taint the favorable impression I had of the school.

Students who only see the academic value in college education, or those who perceive college education merely as a stepping stone for the future career success, tend to regard their social growth as less important and in turn weaken their attachment to college.

George Ouzounian, a 28-year-old U drop-out who is the writer and owner of a popular satirical website and has
become a New York Times best selling author, found college education very appealing when he first matriculated into the U as a freshman. His dream was to become a programmer working in a video game company and he believed that the U, with a decent computer science program, would be able to teach him valuable skills and offer him a degree that he believed was tantamount to at least two years of work experience.

Speaking of his experiences with college education and explaining why he dropped out, Ouzounian said, “I have learned a lot about college, but not much in college.” He told me that not long after enrolling at the U, he became disappointed in the overall experience in the classroom and with some of the teachers. He described to me one of the physics classes where there were around 140 students enrolled, which greatly outnumbered the seats available in the classroom, forcing some students to sit in the stairway. He also expressed his frustrations with some of the professors for their lack of care and enthusiasm for teaching. All the dissatisfactions he had compelled him to question what college education could really offer him.

When asked what role a college education should play in our society, another U drop-out, Robert Kangas, a former database developer at Microsoft, believed that an ideal college education is one that actually prepares students for skills they need in the real world. Explaining why he chose to go to college, Kangas said it was not a conscious decision because he had always been told that it was the thing to do in order to get a good job.

During the first year of college, Kangas experienced disappointments similar to Ouzounian’s in the curriculum and the quality of some of his instructors’ teaching. He started feeling unmotivated when he realized that the U was not teaching him what he needed to know to advance in the industry because he felt the curriculum was outdated. In addition, he felt he spent so much time studying but did not learn much because most of his effort went into satisfying different prerequisites that he believed were in place just to weed out people who were not serious about the subject matter. After almost one year in school, Kangas left to evaluate his decision and never went back.

Both Ouzounian and Kangas viewed college education as a place where students could learn useful knowledge and skills that would help them reach their career goals. Both of them, however, failed to see that college could offer social as well as academic fulfillment. In addition, both of them also focused their attention on the destination of the college education—a degree; they failed to value college education as an extraordinary journey of self-discovery and an experience in itself.

Ouzounian and Kangas both expressed that they hardly ever participated in any extra-curricular activities while they were in school and their social interactions with other students were very limited. Their goals in college were to take useful courses, get a degree and be successful afterwards. “The shortest distance between two dots is a straight line” was the mindset adopted by goal-oriented students like Kangas and Ouzounian. For them, the fastest and shortest route was the best choice. In the first college year, Kangas dove directly into the required courses for the computer engineering department since he did not want to “waste any time” on classes that he regarded as easy, such as general education courses. Given their mindset, exploring different fields and experiencing college social life became unimportant, or even a nuisance, like an unnecessary detour.

In absence of college social life of any kind and lack of involvement in areas outside their required studies, college became very single-dimensional to Ouzounian and Kangas. The curriculum had become their only and entire concern and their studies were the only link they had to college. Once the education system failed their one and only expectation, college in their view had become a failed system as a whole.

The emphasis on college education as an experience can help students whose perspectives are similar to those of Ouzounian and Kangas focus less on the
practical function of higher education and make them feel less disappointed when they see the discrepancies between expectations and reality.

When Kangas was still going to school, he was also working part time at a telemarketing company with responsibilities related to his major. At first, Kangas expected a college degree would be enough to lead a successful career, but life examples shattered his expectation. “I have known people who worked very hard for a degree and ended up working a waiter job,” Kangas said. “College simply doesn’t guarantee an individual success.” Furthermore, his perception of college as being the only path to career success had also been changed: having seen many talented coworkers without a degree and less competent ones with a degree, Kangas realized that a person would find a way to be successful no matter what path he took in life. “Bill Gates is a shining example of this,” Kangas said.

When asked what he would say to high school students about college education, he answered, “I’d tell them that college isn’t the right course for everyone. Don’t let recruiters and parents fool you.”

Kangas’ perception of college education has played a crucial role in his choice to drop out. The reason why he went to college in the first place was because he had seen a tight link between higher education and a promising career, but when he witnessed a reality that contrasted his expectations, he started doubting his decision to go to college.

While it is pivotal for students to have a proper assessment of the practical function of higher education, it is also important for them to understand that it is no longer realistic or even possible for them to tightly link college with career and plan every single step for their future. In this modern world where change is constant, we no longer pursue a career until retirement; many people change careers many times. Ouzounian provides the best example: dreaming to be a video game programmer earlier in his life, he used to work at a fast food restaurant, and later on became a senior programmer. Now, he sells T-shirts through his website and stands out as a well-known author.

Speaking of the long-standing misconception about planning among students, Zinsser (1978) pointed out that what students want these days is a chart to plot out their course through life, ignoring the possibility that life may have many unexpected turns in store for them.

Since the perception of college education can greatly affect a student’s college experiences, and in turn, plays a great role in determining if students will pursue their higher education to the end, it is of the utmost importance for students to have a comprehensive and proper understanding of higher education before and during college years. Thoughts lead to actions. With open minds, they will be mentally ready for any challenges or difficulties they may confront at a later time, while paying sufficient attention to their individual social development and tuning their expectations to a more realistic level.

Since the non-academic factor can play such a great role in students’ experiences with college, it is vital for the school to give students a clear idea of what to expect. Practically speaking, this process of awareness enhancement can take various forms. It can be carried out on a personal level, such as assigning a personal counselor to each student, especially for freshman year students. Or some mandatory lectures on “what college education really means” can be offered where successful guest speakers are invited to share their experiences and perceptions of their college educations and how their experiences in college affect their careers and personal lives.

While it is essential for students to understand college education far more than the area of academics, it is also of equal importance for teachers and school administrators to understand the same thing so that the nature of the school policy-making process can give more weight to non-academic factors.
The phenomenon of student retention at college and university campuses remains in large part a perplexing issue for educators and students alike. Educators are often left wondering what triggers some students to leave campus before successful graduation (Tinto 1993). Students slip through the cracks, particularly in larger universities away from home – lacking close social support of loved ones (Murtaugh, Burns & Schuster, 1999). Many university students become discouraged by not being able to retain what they are expected to learn while attending the university (Scholzman 2001). This is not a simple phenomenon – there are many issues at play here.

According to Webster (2006) retention is defined as “the act of retaining, the state of being retained, the power to retain; capacity for retaining, and finally the act or power of remembering things; memory” (p. 631). Being able to retain information is vitally important for all who wish to succeed at the university; yet the question that continues to perplex many educators is that of why many of today’s university students are not retaining that which they learn. Understanding the answers to this question can provide additional insight into assisting university students who continue to struggle with academic retention. Increased understanding is needed both by professional educators and students regarding retention’s necessary role at the university.

While the literature regarding student retention among university students is vast, there continues to be differing viewpoints and variables attributing to student retention (Hyman, 1995). Yet there is consistent literature suggesting that the single most important factor involved for assisting university students who are at-risk for not being able to keep up or retain that which the demands of university life places upon them is helping them to feel that they are cared for by the institution (Bray, 1985; Braxton et al., 1995; Holmes, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Wyckoff, 1999).

Further research and investigation regarding student retention and its causes are needed to gain increased understanding by educators, administrators, disability services, counselors, tutors and other staff members who are interwoven into the fabric of the students’ lives while attending universities and colleges. It is imperative that the many students struggling with retention difficulties are not overlooked until it is too late for them to succeed, particularly in larger universities where they can easily feel lost or as though they are a mere number (little fish in a big pond) at a huge institution away from home and loved ones. Some students are particularly vulnerable to feelings that they do not belong, feel rejected, and may not adjust to normal academic challenges associated with college life (Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

According to Tinto (1998), students who are assisted by even one caring, competent teacher, counselor, or staff member are more likely to be retained in college. But is merely being retained in college enough? Equally or perhaps of even greater importance than ‘being retained...
Retention can further be thwarted among today’s university students due to the ‘information overload’ of our day. Students are privy to information coming in at higher and faster rates than any age in the history of mankind. A surprisingly increasing amount of university students simply feel unable to retain what they learn in the first place, let alone stay caught up on the ever increasing bombardment of new information flooding them daily while attending school (National Academic Advising Association, 2000). While technological advances have opened countless opportunities to further learning at a faster rate, some students have difficulties deciphering what to sift out which leaves some students feeling further confused and discouraged. Students today are not only expected to be computer savvy, but are also expected to be able to retain larger amounts of new information daily.

Additional important factors affecting university student retention are health problems and learning disabilities. Furthermore, negative self-esteem adversely affects students’ school performance and retention capabilities. It is vital for students to keep their minds and bodies as healthy and clear as possible in order to be able to effectively retain what they learn.

Binge drinking, for instance, is a serious condition that today’s university students are surrounded by. It has become so common among today’s university campuses that it has been reported nationally to be the number one concern of university presidents throughout the nation (Harvard health study, 2007). Binge drinking greatly reduces student retention and increases negative self-image (Center for Abuse Prevention, 1997). Many students also face the huge burden of financial difficulty, worrying about the ever increasing tuition and textbook costs, housing, food and fuel costs. Most students today hold jobs (many full-time) in addition to being full time university students. This can lead to insufficient study time, as well as being too tired to concentrate after work and a full class load. This causes additional stress, which has been proven by researchers and scientists to lower the immune system, alter normal sleep habits and a host of other physical and psychological maladies according to Luskin (2005). All of which are but a few pieces in the retention puzzle.

Having a learning disability directly affecting my retention, I researched the resources currently available on campuses to aid students’ retention. In addition to the standard tutoring centers, health centers, disability centers and financial aid offices found on every university campus, there are few other resources available specifically for assisting students in retention. And the resources that are available continue to remain unknown to many of the younger students who likely need them the most. Unfortunately many of the university students who struggle with retention are either unaware of or unwilling to utilize the current resources available. Last semester I opened up discussions regarding the difficulty students face regarding their abilities to not only retain what they learn, but also their abilities to continue to be retained by the university. I discovered mildly frustrated students, as well as those who seem to want to give up. One such student in one of my classes, who allowed me to use her first name, Michelle, finally shared with me near the end of the semester that she was so deeply depressed she could barely make it to class most days. She was working full time as a paramedic and still trying to attend the university full time. She confided in me...
that she felt extremely depressed, overwhelmed, tired, and unable to retain what she was barely able to learn. Clearly stress and depression cause valid problems with retention among students. I asked Michelle if she had utilized any of our university resources, to which she answered that she had not. In addition, I asked several other university students throughout the semester if they had utilized any of the university’s resources in place to assist them with retention and constantly heard “what resources?” To my surprise, many students still remain unaware of the campus resources. Financial aid in the form of Pell Grants and Federal student loans was the most often used resource by students questioned, which certainly reduces financial worries, which reduces stress; therefore in a round about way, affects retention.

Another real dilemma more and more students face today, greatly affecting their ability to retain that which they learn, are learning disabilities such as dyslexia, Attention Deficit Disorder and Depression. These are a few of the more common disorders affecting many students retention and are valid medical disorders that professors must continually be aware of and remain sensitive to. Retention is difficult for many university students, but for those with disabilities it is often magnified. Students with disabilities particularly need to be given additional support and accommodations made for them. Speaking on behalf of students, most of us do not come to the university to fail; rather we come to learn. Students make large sacrifices to come to the university. It is tragic when an inability to successfully remember incoming information gets in the way of a student’s learning.

Retention has a great deal to do with how effective teachers are at instructing students as well. I was shocked when a professor of mine this past semester said to the entire class: “We don’t have to be excellent teachers because this is a research university; more is expected of us to make sure we stay on top of research; so, if we are average teachers, it is enough” (name withheld to protect the professor). Is it not a teacher’s responsibility to assist students in learning and retaining what they learn? Are university students being effectively taught? These are questions that are not easily answered, but it bothers some educators that university instructors do not have to go through any type of licensure to teach at the university (Hall, 2007). Hopefully this will change in the future, mandating that university professors undergo the same type of licensure to learn ‘how to teach’ as secondary and elementary education teachers are required to go through. Hall (2007) feels it is not enough for teachers to know the subject matters of their teaching well, but that all teachers need to be held to some type of a standard regarding ‘how’ they will teach what they teach. A licensure process may not alleviate or eradicate the entire problem; however it would be beneficial to students and professors alike, for professors would learn how to be better teachers, thus allowing students to be taught in more effective and efficient manners in order to better retain what they learn.

From excellent, well-trained, caring teachers, students not only learn a great deal but also better retain what they have learned. Furthermore, students with learning disabilities and chronic health problems can retain their learning more effectively when they have qualified teachers according to Page & Page (2007). A retired former high school teacher and principal, now university professor, (Burton, 2007) recently made a comment that I agree upon and strive to live by: “People (students included) do not care how much you know if they do not know how much you care”. Ironically enough, this is an upper division class on teaching students how to effectively teach health.

The teachers who I have learned best from are those who take an interest in us and our learning. These teachers let us know that they are available for additional help, and often stay after class to answer students’ questions. This

“Persistence has become the ‘buzzword’ around many campuses. Persistence is what made Abraham Lincoln become president, after failing so many times. Persistence is that ability to not give up. Persistence also means taking courage and pressing forward against all odds.”
lets me know that they not only know their material but also truly help students succeed. This type of teaching particularly helps students who have difficulty with retention (Page & Page 2007).

Teachers could set up study groups as part of the curriculum to assist students struggling to retain that which they learn. In addition, there are several methods that could be set in place and further implemented by the campus administrators to communicate and better utilize current resources, which would include having well advertised places for students who are having problems with retention to turn to.

Fortunately, most professors are aware and willing to accommodate students with disabilities in addition to being supportive. They are to be admired and appreciated, for they are the special men and women who belong in the honorable profession of teaching.

To aid students, academic success workshops are offered on most university campuses assisting students in learning how to manage time effectively, methods for taking tests and dealing with test anxiety, as well as helping students learn how to navigate the Campus Information System. Furthermore, though disability offices are now on every university campus, many (including ours) need better equipped to handle such disorders. Students with physical and or mental/medical or emotional disabilities are entitled by law to be fairly assisted by educated, caring well trained staff to deal with and help them to succeed. The disability office can be a great resource to help these students in their needs, yet unfortunately many such centers employ uneducated staffs who are not well trained, fully equipped, or willing to take the time to assist students. This can be such an overwhelming source of frustration for some students that they simply give up and leave the university.

Lastly, there has to be a willingness and desire to on the students’ part to learn and retain. It is each student’s responsibility to make the most of the university while attending. Being a student myself, I have learned that the majority of students want to learn and do care. I have also learned that there are some who do not care whether they learn or not, but this is how life is. We, as students, must learn to deal with different types of individuals in life and remain thankful for the special mentors, teachers and staff who are able to show that they care for students’ welfare.

Students can and will need to take a pro-active role in their learning and retaining what they learn. Returning to school after years of being out of the academic arena, I find that many things have changed in the university setting in the past twenty-five years; yet one thing remains the same – students who truly want to learn will overcome many obstacles placed in their paths – even if it is that of having difficulty retaining what they are learning. From a student’s perspective, I would argue that retention at the university is not much different than any thing in life; for the most part, we will get out of our university education as much as we are willing and able to put into it. If we want a good solid education we can work hard to earn it. At times the very hardest thing that discouraged students can do is to be persistent. Teachers can have a great impact on this as well because students for the most part know when a teacher cares. Genuinely positive encouragement from professors, disability office workers, and administrators can go a long way to help students get through difficult times. The research clearly confirms this fact (Page, 2007). Great teaching includes offering students encouragement to persist.

Persistence has become the ‘buzzword’ around many campuses. Persistence is what made Abraham Lincoln become president, after failing so many times. Persistence is that ability to not give up. Persistence also means taking courage and pressing forward against all odds. Retention is a byproduct of persistence. As students, we must adjust to managing our time more effectively and learn to structure our lives so that we focus most of our time and energy on what is most important to us. Still, it is apparent that much more needs to be done to help university students who struggle with retention, a topic noteworthy of much further research, discussion and review.
"I'm just taking a break," said a former University of Utah student who asked to remain anonymous, offended when asked why he dropped out of school.

"Having a job is so much more important than getting a degree. Besides, experience is what employers are looking for and [school] just doesn’t fit into my life right now," he said.

Students who drop out of school because of work and family are increasing in numbers and are posing a problem both locally and nationally. National data from the U.S. Census Bureau revealed in 2000 that one in three Americans drops out of college, an overall increase from the 1960s when one in five discontinued his or her studies. The trend to quit school and get a full-time job either for fast money or to support a family is increasing.

When students from around the nation were polled by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 56 percent of the students considered themselves to be “employees who study,” as opposed to 26 percent who said they were “students who worked.” The big difference was that “employees who studied” often worked full-time and went to school part-time.

According to the Scholastic Standards in the University of Utah Student Handbook, on average students at the U are graduating in six years instead of the four that an undergraduate degree is supposed to take, suggesting that “employees who study” make up the majority of the U’s student body.

In Utah, local culture often creates an atmosphere that demands employees who study. Utah culture has strong family values that are embedded in its society. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in a study called “Indicators of Marriage and Fertility in the United States from the American Community Survey: 2000 to 2003,” the ages at which Utah men and women get married are among the lowest in the nation. Whereas in Utah men get married at around 23 years old and women at 22, the national average is men at approximately 27 and women 25.

Former U student Jed Kassing runs a successful logo business from his home. He dropped out of the U after the birth of his first child and completing two years of college. Kassing said that after he got married he took a semester off to settle down, but then his wife got pregnant so he took another one off, and then the baby was born. That is when he knew he was not going to be able to fit school into his life, and Kassing’s story is not unique.

The University of Utah has guidelines for schoolwork
load and what to expect to study per credit hour. Under the policy section in the handbook it states:

As a rule of thumb, you should plan to study two hours for every hour you are in the classroom. That means that if you are registered for twelve credit hours, you’ll need 24 hours a week of study time. With that in mind if you’re working or have other commitments, you may need to make an adjustment in your course load or outside commitments.

There are 168 hours in a seven-day week, and for those who are working 40 hours a week, taking 12 credit hours, studying for 24 hours outside of class, and raising a family, it’s no wonder students do school part-time while working full-time, which explains in part why it takes six years to complete a four year degree, and which may help explain why the average age of students graduating from the U is 26 years old.

Instructors at the U do their best to understand the “employee who studies” lifestyle. Glen Feighery, an assistant professor in the communication department at the U, said, “I think most [professors] understand that ‘the real world’ impinges on academia, and they are willing to accommodate that. Most of us can sniff out an occasional slacker from honest students who experience genuine difficulties.”

Upromise Inc., a company dedicated to helping make an education an attainable goal, commissioned a study to find out why working is becoming so common for college students. The findings, published in 2001 as “Learning and Earning: Working in College,” demonstrate that students are working more because financial aid and parental assistance isn’t enough to pay for college. Table 2 (graphic, from their research shows the average number of hours worked by students during the school year and how it varies by institution type and by whether the student is part-time or full-time.)

“Employed students worked an average of 25 hours per week. About one-quarter of students work 35 or more hours per week, and another quarter of students work 15 hours or less. Students at four-year colleges are more likely to work a smaller number of hours per week; over one-third of such students work fewer than 15 hours,” concluded the study.

The study was also concerned with the effect that working so many hours could have on students’ grade point averages: “Part-time student employment may have beneficial effects…students who work fewer than 10 hours per week have slightly higher GPAs than other similar students…full-time employment may impair student performance.”

The study also showed that working has a negative effect on the GPAs of the 55 percent of students who are working 35 hours or more. The study concluded that work is not a bad thing to be doing, but that it is unclear when it begins to be a detriment to an education.

The study also demonstrated that the financial gain over a lifetime for someone that graduates compared to someone who does not graduate is much higher. For example, if students were to work less during school years, they may have a smaller income, but after graduation they will make up for it by getting higher paying jobs.
jobs. The study suggests that to increase the number of students who graduate from college with a competitive GPA, “it may be prudent to find other ways of financing college so they can complete their degrees, maintain their academic performance levels, and thereby reap the long-term benefits of a college education.”

As work and family begins to compete with students’ class schedules, the credit hours they can handle, and access to the library and to study groups, students begin to drop out. “Students who work full-time are also more likely to drop out of school. For example, the available evidence is consistent with a roughly 10 percentage point differential in graduation rates between full-time and part-time workers. In 2000, nearly 830,000 full-time college students worked full-time. Because of the adverse effects of such full-time work, tens of thousands of these college students are likely to drop out of school and fail to receive a college degree,” concluded the Upromise study.

There are many solutions to the problem of having too many “employees who study.” Upromise Inc. online provides suggestions on how to save for college and how to find out about scholarships and scholarship agencies. USANA Health Sciences (a nutraceutical company located in West Valley City), 1-800-CONTACTS and Comcast are a few local companies, among several others, that offer scholarship programs and tuition reimbursement for their employees. Many forms for federal grants and other ways to receive money can be found on local and national government websites.

One way to help retain the student body could be as simple as letting students know all of their options. For example, some schools require their student body to meet with advisors every semester to discuss financial aid and class scheduling options before they can register for classes. Students at the U are not required to see an advisor during the majority of the time they spend at school, and they may be missing essential information because of it.

Collegezone.com, which is powered by the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC), suggests several ways that a student can balance work and school without feeling as if they have to choose between the two. ISAC suggests students look into Cooperative Education (Co-op) programs. Co-op programs allow students to work full-time one semester then go to school full-time the next, and both semesters count for credit. The National Commission for Cooperative Education (NCCE) website, www.co-op.edu, provides more information for students and administrators who are interested in these co-op programs.

As the number of “employees who study” increases, educational institutions as well as government agencies, teachers and students themselves should find ways to make education a rewarding and healthy experience, not just one more thing they have to fit in to their already hectic schedules. Administrators must prove that having a degree is often even more important than work experience. The trick is to help those students who are juggling too many commitments simplify and focus their goals, and to get those students who are “just taking a break” to come back and finish what they started.

The trend to drop out of school to work continues to increase as does the need to make sure that students understand that a degree is more valuable in the long run than having work experience. The understanding that a degree is essential will not only make people want to get one, but may also help deal with retention problems in higher education.
Cherry Cheng
“I graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong with a major in Finance. After graduation, I had worked in an accounting firm in Hong Kong for a year before I was transferred to the Salt Lake City branch within the same firm. Now, I am self-employed as an online store manager.”

Ron Dansfield
“I am a senior in the Film Studies Department. Sometimes I take pictures.”

Shelby Dobson
“I’m 20 years old. I’m majoring in Mass Communication with a sequence in Electronic Journalism. My minor is Sociology. I plan to graduate in May 2007. I want to be a news producer at a television station. I am passionate about writing!”

Jessica Fresques
“My degree is in Mass Communication- News Editorial. I am currently in N.Y.C doing an internship with Rolling Stone Magazine, which I am not going to lie, is absolutely amazing. I will be graduating this May and pursuing a career within journalism. I absolutely enjoyed doing this past article entitled “retention through identification.” It was great to make my way through campus and talk to a variety of faculty members and students.”

Randi Jo Gause
“I major in Communication with an emphasis in Public Relations. I am graduating in the upcoming summer of 2007, and I will be interning with Utah Bride and Groom this summer. I am attending graduate school in Alaska next fall in order to pursue my masters degree in English. Eventually, I hope to become a college professor in English and Journalism.”

Wei Luo
“I am a Ph.D. candidate from the Department of Communication. I am writing my doctoral dissertation on Chinese consumer culture and Chinese women’s consumption of cosmetic surgery. Since I started to pursue my graduate studies at the University of Utah, I have fully enjoyed learning and teaching in academia. Being the editor of lessons magazine, I have gained valuable experiences not only in editing but also in teamwork with bright and enthusiastic writers.”

Lori Madsen
“I am not the traditional university coed; I reentered the academic arena five semesters ago. I am a senior double majoring in Health Promotion and Education, and communication. I plan on beginning graduate school soon after graduating in the spring. I have enjoyed writing for lessons regarding student retention, a subject I know much about, having a few learning disabilities as well as living in chronic pain. Still, I remain positive and strive for excellence in my studies. I enjoy serving others. I plan to continue with my writing, and I also hope to teach.”

Allie Schulte
“I am a senior at the University of Utah studying English (BA) and Mass Communication (BS). I plan on graduating after the fall 2007 semester, and will then pursue a career in newspaper or magazine writing. I graduated from West High School in Salt Lake City in 2005, but lived in Wichita, Kansas for most of my life. Along with writing, I enjoy literature, music, running, sports and spending time with my friends and family.”

Cason Smith
“I am a communications major at the University of Utah. I am working towards a Public Relations degree and would love to work in human resources and mediation. I plan on graduating in the spring of 2008. I am married and have twin daughters who are one. I currently work at USANA Health Sciences in West Valley City as a laboratory technician.”

Roger Tuttle
“I am a graduate student in the Communication Department, studying visual communication. I have several decades of experience in photojournalism, advertising and graphic design. I am currently working building a website called UtahWonders.Com, which shows the diverse beauty of the state in black and white photography.

JP Westenskow
“I was a Public Relations major. I graduated but waiting for the official paperwork and this semester was my last. I am a part time photographer and a full time father. I am 24 and dabble with several different types of photography. I like Lou Reed, David Bowie, and David Byrne. I flyfish in my spare time and enjoy crawling around on the floor and playing with small toys. Peanut butter cookies are my favorite kind of cookies; you know the ones with the fork imprint on the top. Delicious.”

Cara Wieser
“I am finishing my master’s thesis for the University of Utah Department of Communication, and have a bachelor’s degree from the University of Utah English Department. I enjoy teaching both as an adjunct professor at the U and as a riding instructor at a nearby stable. I will assume the editor position of lessons magazine for the next issue.”
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