

Ten Ways to Build Successful Students

with Don Fraser

In Don Fraser's 35 years of teaching and working with colleges, he has determined that having motivated students who succeed in school cannot be hinged on just one thing. Rather, he believes there are 10 ways to build successful students.

"We have overly focused on curriculum. We have lots of textbooks; we have lots of syllabus and course outlines; we have loads of grading systems; we have all of these transcripts that we create. But if we haven't created a motivated, professional, committed student when they graduate, that they're confident in their skill set, all that curriculum and grades doesn't make any difference," says Fraser, professor at Durham College and one of North America's leading authorities on student success and retention.

Fraser believes that for optimum student retention and success you must build an immediate foundation of student motivation through first impression, relationship building, career vision and high performance learning. The 10 ways to accomplish that, Fraser says, are as follows:

Factor #1: Partnership

It's always been understood that partnership is between faculty and students. But there's a different partnership when someone decides to

go to college. "In high school, it was a forced partnership because you have to be in high school; you have no choice. When you made a decision to go to college, you made a decision to pick a particular school and program. So it truly is a partnership of equals where the student wants to learn and the faculty wants to assist them," Fraser says.

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"The students need to perceive themselves and we need to treat them as professionals in training. So it's a professionals-in-training partnership, and that's not what they experienced in high school. The strength of a career college is that is the mission. It is a partnership and you are a professional in training for a career."

The primary piece of this partnership is faculty-students. But you also have student services, support staff, college management, student associations, advisory committees, accreditation organizations, alumni, the importance of the family, and another

really important one—industry employers, he says.

“So we need to know how to connect both as a student and as a college to all of the contributors to that partnership.”

Factor #2: First Impression

This needs to happen not only at the recruitment site, but also when students walk into their first day of classes. And that’s actually done poorly in many cases, according to Fraser.

“Whatever the program is the student has chosen, he or she needs to have an overview, an immersion experience in developing relationships with the faculty, the students and the career vision. If you give that to a student on day one, they will have a story to tell that night on Facebook.

“It’s about core curriculum versus content. Content is what we teach them all the rest of the time. The core is those ‘C’ words: Care, capable, career and confidence. That’s the core we’re building and that’s more important than any content curriculum we could ever teach. A lot of colleges deserve failing grades for not building the core at the beginning. If we wait too long and think it’s going to happen by osmosis

over the first eight weeks, that student may lose confidence enough to, not necessarily drop out, but at least function at a level where they’re at risk and it’s too late later on to turn it around.

“The first few minutes are crucial to reaching our students, fueling their motivation and energy, and helping them develop the confidence that they’re in the right place.”

Factor #3: Follow-Up

From day two all the way through to graduation, you must continue to build on what you established on day one. “We have to make sure the motivation generated on day one is not a one-day wonder. Whatever we do in week one and week two is very formative, and what we do at the mid-term of October is also powerful.

“One of the things you have to do to keep students motivated is to tap into alumni, because after about three weeks even my wisdoms grow thin with the students. After that, the power is bringing in an industry speaker, employer, co-op supervisor, or graduate. We should also have students read the professional magazines, and offer a kind of socializing environment,” Fraser says.



DON FRASER has been a professor in sport management at Durham College in Ontario, Canada, for more than 30 years. He co-designed and implemented Durham’s student success program approximately 20 years ago and has been working with student motivation ever since. He is a professor at

the college and is an independent consultant and trainer in the area of student retention and motivation. He has delivered student motivation seminars to college staff members at colleges across North America. Fraser has done a great deal of research on student success and retention and received a NISOD award for his work in the

area, and has developed “The Right Start to College” retention model. In addition, in 1989 he received the Special Achievement Award from the Province of Ontario for dedicating 20 years of service to amateur sport in Ontario. He was the manager of the Ontario Games for two years before joining Durham College.

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Factor #4: Care and Communication

The students want to make sure you care about them. Every student who walks into a college wants to feel like they fit in and schools need to create an immediate culture where they will start to get to know their classmates and their faculty team and that the caring is not just a one day caring.

“This is how we want to get to know them, their story, who they are and they get to know their classmates,” says Fraser. “The classmates are a very, very important support system for them and if we can create that energy, relationship, openness, trust and respect, we can help them with that. But it will not happen unless we mirror it.”

Factor #5: Capable

Do you make students feel more capable in developing their strengths and confidences? They’re coming to college not just to collect grades and transcripts to graduate. They’re coming to build their capability and the only way to really do that is right from the start. Start to find out the student strengths and to connect those capabilities and strengths, so they can start to see how they’re going to expand those into the competency skill profile they need to develop to be a successful student and to continue being successful upon graduation.

Factor #6: Career

When students enter a career college they’re coming into a major career focus, so all the things that are part of capabilities are defined and focused into the outcome of finding a career. Fundamental to student motivation and retention is creating a vision that students can believe in and own, Fraser explains.

“When we provide them with information that shows them where their education is leading them, why their courses are relevant to their long-term career goal, and paint them a clear picture of career possibilities and opportunities, they will be ready to take their work habits to the next level to ensure they are successful in attaining their career vision. Students need to be able to answer, ‘Why am I doing this?’ so that the curriculum and program have value at any given time. Giving students updates on the job market, competency profile, alumni success stories, and how the curriculum fits in will continue to solidify their confidence,” he says.

Factor #7: Coaching Confidence

This means the student must have confidence as a learner, confidence as a professional, confidence as a contributor, and confidence that when they leave school they can be flexible enough, and persistent enough to keep chasing that career, because it’s not an easy target, Fraser notes. “Building confidence doesn’t happen overnight. It takes 2,000 hours to build high performance in any area, and that’s just the starting point of their career.”

Factor #8: Quality Curriculum

Consider these things, Fraser says. What are we going to teach? What’s in our program of studies? What will be in our syllabus? How will we have a grading system for it? What will be the textbook and the resources? How can we build this over a one- or two-year format?

“And then, everything has to fit together into a competency skill profile that makes sense to employers and to accreditation organizations. Who’s the teacher? Who will be responsible for bringing that alive and teaching the content, evaluating the progress on the

content and turning in a grade that evaluates the student on his or her competency relating to what the curriculum expectation is?”

Factor #9: Student Services

This is the counseling; it's the person in recruitment; it's all of the people at the college who have a supportive function—from the switchboard operator to the Webmaster to the cafeteria people to the security people. But, usually, it's thought of as the people who can help students with whatever risk factors they may have. It's the various support services that are available at the college to give a student the help they need emotionally, academically and financially when they're in trouble.

Factor #10: Quality Teaching

Fraser says schools need to create an education and career vision before they give out a syllabus, textbook, or explain the grading system. If that vision can be created first and right from the start, the students' interest is captured and schools have a real chance to dispel old perceptions of education.

“We can help them realize this is different than high school, and create for them a new perception that college is not an educational workload, but, rather, career preparation for professionals-in-training. This new perception encourages students to take ownership of their education and careers, and helps them start to understand that behavioral change,” explains Fraser. “After they've bought

into an educational vision they believe in and have established a comfort level with their classmates and faculty, we can bring out the syllabi, textbooks and grading systems.”

There must be a focus on changing student behavior toward high-performance work habits. That kind of change must take place in the classroom at the program/faculty level. “When faculty present the curriculum as professional development for a career, the classroom becomes an enriched learning environment that results in more motivated students. Faculty can create a strong program culture through relationship building that fosters a sense of belonging. Students with a support system are much more likely to persist,” he says.

These factors are all things that a college has control over. But none of the factors is valuable unless a student himself has this factor: The ability to self-manage—to come to class, to get the necessary financial support and then the additional everyday self-management. And that involves maximizing the learning that's available. They have to be taught that high-performance learning leads to high-performance careers.

“And, again, it's not about content; it's about behavior. If students have the behaviors of high-performance learners, then all the challenges ahead of them, both in school and in their careers, are going to be much simplified,” Fraser summarizes.