

Teaching in the Momentum Year Project Executive Summary

DEFINING THE MOMENTUM YEAR

The Momentum Year (MY) is a student's first year of college. This year presents a pivotal opportunity to focus on student success and helping students successfully navigate college to have a "clear path to graduation and help them avoid first-year mistakes that heighten the risk they will drop out" (Lee, 2018, para. 2).

COMMITTEE CHARGE

This Committee was charged with developing best practice recommendations for teaching in the MY with a focus on practices that increase retention.

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The Teaching in the Momentum Year Project Group was comprised of ISU faculty who were recipients of the ISU Distinguished Teacher Award. Committee co-chairs were Mark McBeth and Karen Appleby. Committee members were Catherine Black, Barbara Frank, Susan Goslee, Andy Holland, and Donna Lybecker.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Committee outlined the rationale for why ISU should focus on best teaching practices in the MY. These following foundational aspects were emphasized:

- ***The importance of higher education for rural Idahoans:*** Of Idaho's 44 counties, 37 are rural (Idaho Department of Labor); In 2016, only 40.6% of Idahoans held either a college degree or professional certificate, a rate lower than most neighboring states (Richert, 2018). College degrees provide financial security and are a significant vehicle for upward mobility (Barrow and Malamud, 2016).
- ***Importance of retention:*** Retaining students overall and retaining students in their first year is vital to Idaho's efforts toward economic prosperity for all. Low college completion rates are due to a wide range of factors including, but not limited to, financial, mental health, the place-bound nature of Idahoans in rural communities limiting access to education, a low perceived value of higher

- education in the local culture, and, in some unfortunate cases, negative experiences of students in MY classes.
- **Importance of the MY:** With a freshman retention rate of 40%, ISU retention strategies might best focus on ways to retain students during the MY. This Committee focused on teaching-related efforts to increase positive classroom experiences as a method to help students' interest in returning to ISU.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

The Committee also considered the following barriers and challenges we face at ISU in delivering consistently rewarding learning experiences in the MY:

- **Assessment of Teaching:** Because evaluation of teaching quality has been underemphasized, is not well-understood, and is not consistent from one department to the next, the Committee is not confident that high quality teaching is assessed accurately or consistently across the university.
- **Course Delivery:** We need a better understanding of the impact of course delivery on retention. The university does not seem to have a strategic direction for the role of online courses versus in-seat courses. Furthermore, we need to operationally define "distance learning" to include, but distinguish various formats such as asynchronous, synchronous, or a hybrid of the two.
- **Student Preparedness:** Now that there is increasing scholarship on the connection between student preparedness and retention, the Committee wonders about unintended consequences of the Idaho State Board of Education's initiative to create an extensive Early College Program.
- **Long Term vs. Short Term Benefits to the University:** Budget and enrollment should inform Administrative decisions across all areas of university life and operations. We encourage ISU to be wary of decisions that may provide short-term benefits to enrollment at the cost of long-term gains to retention.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that these barriers, exacerbated by our limited understanding of ISU students' MY experiences, are the primary causes of our low retention. The Committee offers four initial recommendations.

- **More Data:** Specifically, the Committee recommends expanding on the current data collected from the ISU Leaver Survey and seeking additional insights from instructional environments that support high quality teaching and connections in the classroom. We should strive to develop better metrics for

quality teaching, and to provide more education to help faculty (who advise students in the MY) understand the correlation between student circumstances and on-time graduation rates.

- **Focus on “First-Contact” Classes:** The Committee recommends that we enhance the experience of students in their MY by establishing an environment of appreciation and respect for first-contact classes. The importance of General Education and other first-contact classes (academic skills and creation of social connections) should be positively communicated to students and faculty.
- **Faculty Development:** The Committee recommends that ISU continue to provide training, resources, and support for faculty who teach and mentor students in the MY. Furthermore, ISU should continue to promote activities and events that highlight and value the connection between teaching and scholarship
- **Champion Quality Teaching:** The University must thoroughly address faculty workload concerns to improve the quality of teaching. The university should regularly and thoughtfully recognize and reward good teaching.

REFERENCES

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TEACHING IN THE MOMENTUM YEAR:

Challenges and Recommendations

DRAFT May 18, 2020

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Teaching in the Momentum Year: Challenges and Recommendations DRAFT May 18, 2020

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Co-chairs: Karen Appleby (Distinguished Teacher, 2010); Mark McBeth (Distinguished Teacher, 2005)

Members: Catherine Black (Distinguished Teacher, 2017); Barbara Frank (Distinguished Teacher, 2015); Susan Goslee (Distinguished Teacher, 2012); Andy Holland (Distinguished Teacher, 2018); Donna Lybecker (Distinguished Teacher, 2013)

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Idaho State University has a six-year graduation rate of only 32%. In the last national ranking done by the Chronicle of Higher Education, ISU ranked 500 out of 574 four-year public institutions in six-year graduation rates (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019a). In fall 2018, ISU's retention rate for freshman (with 0-25 credits) was 40%.

RESPONSE

Our Committee is confident of the following 1) Our students deserve better; 2) To address this problem effectively and long-term, we need a more accurate and sophisticated understanding of first year students and their experiences; 3) High-quality teaching, an appreciation for the liberal arts foundation of the general education requirements, and robust beyond-the-classroom services are crucial elements in a solution; 4) We must think strategically about course delivery (Early College Program, online) in order to think through the way both stronger and less prepared students learn best. 5) We must address barriers to the implementation of these elements and so we end this report with four initial recommendations.

LOW RETENTION AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

We should start with the most obvious and most troubling issue; in rural areas with primarily place-bound students, low retention likely leads to more adults without a 4-year degree. Of Idaho's 44 counties, 37 are rural (according to the Idaho Department of Labor); and in 2016, only 40.6% of Idahoans held either a college degree or professional certificate, a rate lower than most neighboring states (Richert, 2018).

While there are those who question the value of a university education, the evidence is overwhelming that college degrees provide financial security and are a significant vehicle for upward mobility among the working class (see Barrow and Malamud, 2016 for an extensive review). Those with a college degree live more secure lives. Vuolo,

Mortimer, and Staff (2016), for example, empirically demonstrate that after economic turmoil (the recession of 2008-2009) those finishing a four degree are significantly better off than those who did not finish a degree. Furthermore, Berger and Fisher (2013) show that a well-educated workforce (individuals with at least a four-year college degree) is the key to state economic development and prosperity. These authors appropriately conclude, “Investing in education is a core contribution [the] states can make to the well-being of their residents and the national economy” (Berger & Fisher, 2013, paragraph 34).

Idaho is particularly vulnerable to these disparities. Our wage growth was negative among those in the bottom 25th percentile between 2003 and 2017 showing the fragile state of Idaho’s working class (Maciag, 2017). Access to public higher education and the opportunity for working class individuals to finish a college degree is essential in reversing this trend. Retaining students overall and retaining students in their first year is vital to Idaho’s efforts toward economic prosperity for all.

It is obvious that many Idaho families do not have substantial discretionary funds. College tuition that does not ultimately lead to a degree represents lost investment. In fact, there are troubling recent trends of students leaving school without a degree but with increased student-loan debt. For example, Nadworny and Lombardo (2019, paragraph 10) use federal data to report that between the middle of 2014 and the middle of 2016, “3.9 million undergraduates with federal student loan debt dropped out.” Even with relatively small amounts of debt, students who drop out without a degree may never fully recover from starting their adult work lives with deficits in both their skills and their finances.

This grim pairing of low-retention and student debt stems from neither heartless administrators nor clueless students. A substantial part of the problem is how society and government have decided to fund higher education (Ripley, 2018; Mitchell, et al., 2018). Because states have greatly reduced post-secondary budgets, their public universities are forced to raise tuition and fees simply to stay afloat. Thus, students shoulder much more of the costs of public higher education. University administrators operate within these parameters. Part of the role of this Committee of distinguished faculty who are on the “front line” with students on a daily basis is to provide ideas and guidance on how these issues are impacting our students directly and how it might be possible to rethink some of our educational practices that have been dictated by larger forces.

MOMENTUM-YEAR STUDENTS & THEIR EXPERIENCES

According to Lee (2018, paragraph 2), the “Momentum Year focuses on setting college students up for success in their first year” with the idea that in this first year, college and universities should “guide students to make decisions” which will “put them on a clear path to graduation and help them avoid first-year mistakes that heighten the risk they will drop out.” With a freshman retention rate of 40%, ISU retention efforts might best focus on this momentum year (MY).

PART 1: WE HAVE THE LEAVERS SURVEY

What do we know about ISU students who leave during or after their MY? The University has established an important mechanism with the 2018 and 2019 “Leaver Surveys.” Responses suggest that issues with academic advising (either being unavailable or unhelpful), lack of meaningful connections with faculty members, and disappointing quality of instruction were the top four institutional factors that impacted students’ decisions to drop out. Financial and mental health stressors were the top personal reasons.

The ISU Leaver Survey represents a first step, but it cannot yet be considered comprehensive or representative. Response rates for the survey were 9.8% and 10.6% in 2018 and 2019 respectively with 161 responses in 2018 and 189 responses in 2019. It is also difficult to determine response bias; those who participated in the survey might have been students who were the unhappiest about ISU or vice versa. Finally, students’ frustrations and sense of not being served is real, but the leavers’ likely unfamiliarity with a university system might lead to misattribution of responsibility. To do these students’ concerns justice, we need a fuller picture.

PART 2: THE INFORMATION WE STILL NEED

Though our Committee focuses on teaching and not on say, financial aid, and professors must have an accurate sense of both students’ strengths and challenges to effectively refine their instruction. We seek, then, a more accurate and sophisticated understanding of first year students and their experiences. Additional data on the leavers themselves, student mental health concerns, record of general education courses, and instructor priorities are necessary for the University to address retention. As the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2019b, p. 18) argues, “Supporting students starts with understanding them.”

A. *The Leavers*

- Who are the leavers? For example, traditional vs non-traditional? What is their average high school GPA? Household income?
- How many of the Leavers are first-year students?

- What percentage of the leavers are first-generation college students? ISU defines “First Generation College Students” as students where neither parent has completed a college degree. In the fall of 2019, 24% of ISU’s total undergraduate degree seeking student body was defined as “first generation.” Nationally, first-generation university students graduate at lower rates than their classmates--by a 14 percentage-point difference (McCartney, 2017).
- On average, how much financial aid did the Leavers receive? How much have they taken out in loans?
- What percentage of leavers in the MY started at ISU with significant Early College credits?
- Are the majority of MY students at ISU prepared for a four-year university?

B. Mental health & support needs

- Are there early signals that at-risk students give out during their MY before they leave?
- How many Leavers fail or withdraw from a class?
- How many students in the MY access and use academic advising, counseling, financial guidance, and other ISU support services?
- How have other universities improved access to these services for their MY students?
- Do midterm grades provide an opportunity for increased outreach?
- Would an earlier checkpoint help identify potential Leavers? St Louis Community College developed a “First Four Weeks” initiative to address retention, which has also been adopted at Colorado State University (Dodge, 2018).

C. First-Contact Courses

- What courses are students actually taking in the MY? Is the profile different for Leavers than for students who continue?
- How many credits did Leavers take during their MY?
- How many MY students omit traditional first year courses (like English or Math general education requirements) from their curricula?
- How often do students take upper-division courses during their MY? Did they complete the pre-requisites at ISU?
- How are first-contact courses delivered to Momentum-Year students? Distance or on the course’s home campus? In-seat or online? If online, synchronous or asynchronous?
- Who teaches the first-contact classes? Part-time instructors? Tenure-track faculty? What are the course-caps? What is a typical teaching load? How much support are instructors given for these significant courses?



HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING, AN APPRECIATION OF THE LIBERAL ARTS, AND STRONG SOCIAL PEDAGOGY WILL INCREASE RETENTION

HIGH QUALITY TEACHING, WHICH INCLUDES A SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Recent research (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2019b, p.12) strongly suggests that a supportive classroom environment is fundamental and that “a great teacher with a strong connection to a student makes all the difference.” The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2019b, p. 12) further argues that “Institutions may track students' attendance or grades but overlook the educational experience. Innovation in teaching and learning should be central to campuses' student success plans - or other efforts will have little effect.” Several empirical studies demonstrate the importance of faculty-student connection (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, and Oh, 2008; Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer, 2012). Eyler (2018, pp. 111-112) uses the term, “social pedagogy” to describe teaching strategies that “maximize student interaction and collaboration.” This Committee agrees that student-faculty connection (social pedagogy) in the classroom should be essential throughout a student’s career at ISU with connection in the MY (Shelton, 2003) being even more crucial.

A supportive classroom environment can be defined and experienced in a number of ways: a sense of belonging, community, or cohort. O’Keefe (2013, p. 605) writes, “The capacity of a student to develop a sense of belonging within the higher education institution is recognised by this paper as being a critical factor determining student retention. The creation of a caring, supportive and welcoming environment within the university is critical in creating a sense of belonging.” There are examples nationally where departments find that students want “two specific things from their degree: a logical path and a cohort” and they seek “direction and community” (Steinhauer, 2018). Encouraging an academic community and developing student cohorts can enhance retention.

At the undergraduate level, we may more commonly associate classroom settings that emphasize student contribution with small Humanities courses. Through its annual review of materials and interviews with candidates for Master Teacher, however, the Committee has come to understand that the best professors in all disciplines incorporate this pedagogy. The sciences just describe it differently: engineering team projects, chemistry experiments that students work together to design and conduct, lab work that students perceive as relevant and rewarding, weekly small group tutoring sessions, biology class trips to help elementary students test hypotheses about animal skeletons. These activities build a sense of a cohort, giving students support when they experience personal or academic challenges.

AN APPRECIATION OF THE LIBERAL ARTS FOUNDATION OF OUR GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS AND FIRST CONTACT

Students must contribute time and effort to co-create this academic community so a course's focus must be understood as worthy of such endeavor. Recent research also asks us to broaden our understanding of the types of university courses that will prove useful for students in the long run. Employers increasingly demand critical thinking, writing, and evaluation skills--objectives that form the liberal arts foundation of a four-year university's curriculum. These objectives are not outdated but rather in greater need.

Our diminished understanding of relevancy stems from our even narrower grasp of the liberal arts. At the majority of four-year colleges and universities the standard undergraduate bachelor degree is one grounded in the liberal arts, whether the specific major is chemistry, psychology, math, anthropology, music, or history. Institutions ask students to take courses across the social and natural sciences, the arts, and the humanities to develop a foundation of knowledge and the ability to question perceived understandings through critical thinking. ISU configures these courses as the general education requirements.

Even majors considered closely aligned with specific career preparation—accounting, nursing, nuclear engineering—in fact build upon these valuable liberal arts skills. Wallman and Hoover (2012, paragraph 12) write of their review of the importance of critical thinking, “In summary, higher-order critical thinking skills are increasingly necessary for success in professional health care careers. Changes in the contemporary healthcare system in the United States arguably make these critical thinking skills more important than they’ve ever been, as clinicians are required on a daily basis to evaluate multiple bits of information about patients with multiple-systemic health concerns and make appropriate treatment decisions based on this information.” Thus, the liberal arts foundation of the general education requirements are essential to and part of a range of studies and disciplines.

We must demonstrate appreciation in our rhetoric as well. Too often, we speak dismissively of general education courses, using such phrases such as “You can knock out your generals” or “just get through your generals.” Or we brag that students arrive on campus “having taken care of their generals.” Too often general education courses are viewed as “filler” to be spread throughout the curriculum to balance credits required by the major. To some extent this is necessitated by prerequisite sequences within degrees, but this produces a real disjunction in views of what general education courses are even for and it greatly lessens their value. As discussed above, these courses

should provide a foundation of critical thinking and classroom skills (how to take notes, participate in discussion, and manage assignments).

The Committee is excited about ISU's new leadership and the administration's commitment to excellence.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

The Committee prioritizes two broad categories of university life beyond the classroom in ISU's response to its troublingly low retention rate: Support services and intellectual community all support a social pedagogy of providing a sense of belonging, connection, and community.

Student support services are crucial to the MY student success (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2019b). Some of the principles (pp. 49-55) that are supported by successes at other colleges and universities in helping first year students include:

1. **Helping First Generation Students Thrive:** This includes not only scholarships but a support community which provides a sense of belonging to first generation students.
2. **Develop Meaningful Campus Jobs:** Not only does this provide students with much needed financial support but meaningful jobs also provide the students with crucial experience in their career preparation.
3. **Build Apprenticeships with Local Employers:** Federal programs can assist in "white collar" apprenticeships as well as more traditional "blue collar" ones.
4. **Give Students a Financial Safety Net:** This includes raising money for student financial emergencies.
5. **Tackle Poverty with a Culture of Caring:** This includes food pantries and emergency financial aid to students.
6. **Support Students Recovering from Addiction:** College and universities are providing education and talks on addiction along with support groups.

ISU already provides much of the above. The University, however, needs to increase its commitment to counseling service, academic advising, disability services, financial aid education, Bengal Pantry, Diversity Center, Veteran's Services, Writing Center, and other such centers. There are fantastic professionals in these fields at ISU; but with limited resources, they are spread too thin.

We encourage ISU to foster an academic community characterized by intellectual curiosity and engagement--across the sciences, arts, and humanities. In other words, ISU should continue to buttress social pedagogy. A vibrant and supported central library is crucial for not only student and faculty research, but also an institution's sense of itself

as a relevant and capable university. Libraries let students know that they are part of a culture of learning, one committed to an exchange of ideas. To articulate one more way: great universities have great libraries (and we don't believe that "wealthy" is a synonym to "great").

An academic community can introduce new students to a time of critical thinking and professional training. This community must work to ensure that non-traditional students, first-generation students, students from under-represented groups and ethnicities feel welcome and have opportunities to then shape the culture for students who come after. To enact its mission, an accredited university cannot shy away from intellectual engagement; rather it must embrace and champion it.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

The Committee identifies barriers to establishing high-quality teaching as the standard throughout ISU within assessment, course delivery, student preparedness, and prioritization of enrollment goals.

ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING

ISU has a tremendous number of effective, rigorous, and compassionate instructors. Because evaluation of teaching quality has been under emphasized, is not well-understood, and is not consistent from one department to the next, the Committee is not confident that high quality teaching is consistently or accurately assessed across the university.

Student course evaluations currently are our primary metric of teaching effectiveness across campus. However, since the commencement of online implementation of these evaluations, response rate has been low, making them a less valid measurement of teaching effectiveness. The Committee also noted that using teaching evaluations as the only metric for instruction can potentially be flawed and include bias (Flaherty, 2020). In addition, students who drop out during the first year are less likely to be in courses at the end of the semester in order to complete teaching evaluations.

While the response rate of student course evaluations needs to improve, teaching assessment will be more accurate and more instructive with the inclusion of additional elements such as mid-term student evaluation and feedback, peer observation, assessment of course materials (i.e., course syllabus), and post-course faculty reflection (Flaherty, 2018). The varied approaches used to enhance teaching development by departments across the university could also be highlighted. For example, what lessons and practices can be learned from majors at ISU who have high retention rates in students' first year?

Faculty are not always encouraged to evaluate their teaching or consider *how* they evaluate their teaching. In part because teaching is not always where faculty are getting rewarded--in terms of commendation or additional resources. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2019b, 14), for example, argues that colleges and universities should, "Reward faculty for experimentation and innovation around teaching and learning, including taking a research-based approach to their own teaching." Faculty would benefit from more support to assess their teaching and resources that would allow them to incorporate new pedagogies (i.e., service learning, simulations, peer-instruction, and case-work) effectively in their classes.

The Committee hypothesizes that faculty workload prohibits a successful balance of quality teaching with scholarship and service. For our lecturers and adjuncts, are we adequately supporting the professional development in relation to teaching and instruction?

COURSE DELIVERY

We need a better understanding of the impact of course delivery on retention. The Committee appreciates that as a regional university in a rural area, ISU should persistently assess and address barriers of access to a college education--from childcare, to driving distance, to affordability, to class times. The Committee also appreciates that there are a range of online delivery methods at ISU and that there are effective fully asynchronous online courses. These courses, for example, may have Zoom rooms that allow students to build connections with their classmates. Additionally, there are efforts within ISU to have in-seat courses outfitted with OWL and Zoom conferencing, allowing distance students to participate much more fully with the instructor and students on site.

While technology, then, holds much promise for increasing accessibility and modes of engagement with course material, technology is subject to its own unintended consequences (Haughton, et al., 2013). To be more specific, the university does not seem to have a strategic direction for the role of online courses versus in-seat courses. Furthermore, we need to operationally define "online" to include various formats such as asynchronous, synchronous, or a hybrid of the two. For the Committee, the experience of being amongst peers in a college classroom is essential to learning especially in the MY. Or at the very least, the Committee believes that when strategically it makes sense to offer remote learning, students can be connected to peers either at the university or with peers in other remote locations. Technology is making these connections more possible. Research verifies the significance of sociality and connections made possible by in-seat courses (Eyler, 2018).

The Committee suspects that, consequently, the increasing number of asynchronous online courses at ISU could negatively and unintentionally impact retention. Bettinger and Loeb (2017) find that while online courses offer better access, they reduce student grades (pp. 2-3). A study of the California Community College system revealed that “on average, students have poorer outcomes in online courses in terms of the likelihood of course completion, course completion with a passing grade, and receiving an A or B” (Hart, Friedmann, and Hill 2017, p. 42). Stöhr, Demazière, and Adawi (2020, p. 1) report that online classes can exacerbate the distance between the strongest and weakest student performances. They compared online flipped engineering courses with traditional in-seat flipped engineering courses and found “while there was no statistically significant difference on average performance between the campus-based and online flipped format, the online flipped format led to a significantly larger spread – a polarization in performance.” The authors attribute this difference to the distance between the teacher and student that is found in online courses.

More troublingly, Bettinger and Loeb explain that “taking a course online, instead of in person, increases the probability that a student will drop out of school” (p. 3). Specifically, in the semester after taking an online course, students are “about 9 percentage points less likely to remain enrolled.” In short, students who take online courses have lower grades and are more likely to drop out. Enrolling exclusively in online courses may create academic hardships for those students likely to have most difficulty bouncing back. We quote a conclusion from Protopsaltis and Baum (2019, p. 1):

[O]n average fully online coursework has contributed to increasing gaps in education success across socioeconomic groups while failing to improve affordability....Even when overall outcomes are similar for classroom and online courses, students with weak academic preparation and those from low-income and under-represented backgrounds consistently underperform in fully online environments.

Not all studies are negative about asynchronous online teaching and retention; and several studies provide ideas on--1) who benefits from such courses and who do not and 2) how online teaching can be improved. Cochran, et al. (2014), for example, use a large sample of undergraduate students and show that online retention can be predicted by a student’s prior GPA, class standing, and previous withdrawal from online courses. While James, et al. (2016) found that students taking a blend of online and in-seat courses had a similar retention rate to students taking only in-seat courses. However, that did find that “older students taking only online courses were retained at higher rates than younger students taking only online courses at both primarily onground community colleges and primarily online institutions.” Gaytan (2013, p. 145) in interviews with

online teaching experts similarly concludes that three factors affect student retention in online courses and these are “student self-discipline, quality of faculty and student interaction, and institutional support to students.” While not negative about online learning and retention, these studies do suggest that not all students are going to benefit from such teaching and their findings imply that a more strategic approach to who enrolls in online courses is needed.

Bawa (2016) provides a review of the problem with retention in online courses including the fact that students underestimate the difficulties of asynchronous online courses, social and family commitments, and lack of motivation for self-directed learning. Bawa (2016) furthermore recounts a study by Dow (2008) which stated that one of the biggest downfalls of online learning and one that contributes to retention problems is the lack of live communication between students and their professor. Bawa (2016, p. 7) writes:

Dow’s study reveals that not having a ‘live’ component in the interactions was very detrimental to the online learning atmosphere. He lists several areas of concern in this regard such as the absence of live conversations, not having any visible identifiers such as photos of teachers and peers, and a general frustration about the time gaps between communications. Students feel uncomfortable when they are unable to see the people they are conversing with, which in turn hinders how they may gauge the feelings of their peers online. Consequently, online courses should be designed to foster more social interaction between peers and students-teachers.”

Next, what are the impacts of online classes on the learning environment for in-seat students? We have concerns that asynchronous online courses can empty in-seat classrooms, lowering the number of in-seat classes available. Finally, it is a win-win when MY students are welcomed into departments with an established sense of student camaraderie, a spirit that is most effectively sustained when major and minor students are physically present. We again think that a strategic approach to online learning is important. We also contend again that the definition of online must be broadened to not just include asynchronous but also synchronous online which can include Zoom courses, Web-RTC courses in distance learning classrooms, traditional distance learning classes, and courses that combine in-seat students with remote students. Asynchronous courses themselves can better incorporate live elements. Online courses with this broadened definition are able to better connect to students and these connections will improve student retention while also maintaining in-seat courses in ISU campuses.

STUDENT PREPAREDNESS

Now that there is increasing scholarship on the connection between student preparedness and retention, the Committee wonders about unintended consequences of Idaho's extensive Early College Program (ECP). If students are completing substantial lower-division requirements while still in high school, are they then enrolling in upper-division courses their first semester on campus? Upper-division courses assume students have substantial study skills and a familiarity with the workings of the university. Such placements would lead to a mismatch of student readiness and course expectations. As the State Board of Education remains committed to ECP, ISU is limited in how it can address these concerns.

One alternative approach is to champion the importance of first-contact classes and strategic early advising (e.g., minor degree options or pre-requisites). Because many students are not taking their General Education courses at ISU, we should champion the courses they do take their first semester as college students. Gathering the information listed above on these first-contact classes will help improve students' MY experience.

SHORT-TERM VS LONG-TERM BENEFITS TO THE UNIVERSITY

The Committee members represent a variety of roles across the university and well recognize ISU's budget situation, which is exacerbated by the declining enrollment over the past several years. Budget and enrollment should inform Administrative decisions across all areas of university life and operations. At the same time, we encourage ISU to be wary of decisions that provide short-term benefits at the cost of long-term gains. To be more specific, we caution against prioritizing above all increasing university-wide "credit hours," when such efforts may weaken retention. On a smaller scale, when departments are given access to increased funds, these monies should not all be directed at increasing online learning or "technology," especially when there is little support for increasing the quality of instruction more broadly. Legitimate concerns regarding ISU's enrollment should not devolve into pressure to make university courses less challenging. Instead the Committee encourages faculty to be rigorous but not rigid in their courses. Finally, recruitment and retention are both important. Now that the full scope of the retention crisis is coming to light, however, instructors may be most effective focusing on retention (Strikwerda, 2019).

INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has considered--how can all courses encourage students to do more critical thinking? Which teaching environments build the best connections between faculty and students? How much is in the instructor's control and how much is institutional or

systemic? In response, the paper has described qualities of successful college instruction and barriers to making such teaching standard across the University. We believe that these barriers in conjunction with only a partial understanding of ISU students' MY experiences are the primary causes of our low retention. The Committee then presents four initial recommendations.

- 1) As detailed above, the Committee recommends that we gather more data on students who leave the university (i.e., the ISU Leaver Survey) as well as additional information on the instructional environment these students are leaving. It would be helpful to have an accurate sense of perceptions of teaching across the ISU campus. The University should establish, through development or learning from our aspirational-peers, advanced measures of quality teaching. While we recognize that student evaluations are too often biased, we should develop ways to improve their validity and reliability as well as university-wide response rates for student evaluations. Finally, faculty as a whole need a better understanding of the financial aid environment in which students are making decisions regarding credit hours and hoped for time to graduation.
- 2) The Committee recommends that we enhance the experience of students in their MY by establishing an environment of appreciation and respect for the first-contact classes. We must communicate and champion the importance of these courses--whether they are general education courses, entry-level courses in a major, or skill development or remedial courses. We must also more effectively convey the relevance of first-contact classes--beyond their subject material alone. It is in these courses that students develop foundational critical thinking skills, build the study habits necessary for college success, and form camaraderie or friendships with classmates from across the university.
- 3) The Committee recommends providing training, resources, and support for faculty in relation to teaching and mentoring students in their MY. More specifically, Program for Instructional Effectiveness (PIE) workshops should be recommended for all new faculty. In addition, ISU should provide new faculty with more training or mentorship on how to connect at risk students in their MY with university support services. A workshop co-sponsored by PIE or the Office of Research on establishing fruitful connections between teaching and research would also be of benefit.
- 4) We must create a culture and climate that champions and rewards quality teaching. Because high quality teaching demands time and energy, faculty workload, evaluation measures, and rewards for faculty must be evaluated. The university must thoroughly address faculty workload concerns to improve the quality of teaching. These concerns may involve service obligations, directing independent student learning, course caps, or teaching load to name a few. The university should regularly and thoughtfully recognize and reward good teaching. As part of this, ISU needs to broaden our definition of online learning to include video distance learning, Zoom, and HyFlex models. We also need to think

strategically about course delivery, in particular the role of asynchronous online courses and distance learning opportunities for students in synchronous formats.

CONCLUSION

As we finalize this report, ISU is—rightly so—empty of faculty, students, and all but essential staff. Courses have been on a five-week hiatus so that we may transition to online during the COVID pandemic.

Due to the COVID pandemic we have moved to distance-learning based instruction and we have been separated from our students for the last two months of the semester. We miss our classes; the isolation makes us even more appreciative of our students. And we are even more committed to offering the best courses and providing a vibrant, supportive academic community to every student who enrolls at ISU, from first registration to final credit of degree.

Returning to social pedagogy, Joshua Eyer in his book, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories of Effective College Teaching* reviews advances in learning theory and the cognitive and neurosciences and concludes that sociality is one of the keys to how humans learn. Eyer (2018, pp. 111-112) argues, “Human beings comprise one of the most social species on the planet. Our evolution was closely tied to our sociality, and—specifically—many of our modes of communication and learning developed as a result of these social bonds. Because of these deeply ingrained connections, the most effective teaching techniques will be those that maximize student interaction and collaboration. I refer to these strategies as social pedagogies.” Eyer then concludes that these social pedagogies promote three key elements. These include a “sense of belonging,” “community building,” and a professor who successfully models “effective intellectual engagement.” Social pedagogy is at the core of this committee’s recommendations and the absence of in-seat courses in March-May, 2020 only reinforces our commitment to the concept.

One of our Committee members reported that some students in courses that had been converted into asynchronous courses requested live Zoom lectures. Another Committee member in the sciences stated that while “labs are a really great way for students to make connections - both with their peers and with either the TA or the professor (if teaching the lab). The lab interaction has taken a big hit with the closing of the campus.” Another Committee member mentioned that the new distance learning environments were impacting the importance of connections for both students and faculty when they stated that during weekly Zoom lectures, “I do ask the attendees how they are doing and the common refrain is that all the classes are blending together and it is difficult to keep up with what is due when and for which class. I have to laugh and commiserate

because that is my number one issue teaching from home.” One student told a member of the Committee during closed week that while he “appreciated the move to online during a pandemic, we were cheated out of our {in-seat} class and our discussions with each other.” Our Committee concludes that the pandemic of 2020 only reinforces the centrality of faculty-student connection. Our students have been reaching out to us and we have tried to use technology to reach out to them. Many have commented how they miss the weekly class sessions and how they miss us and their fellow students. Connections between faculty and students are at the core of retaining students and helping them find their way in life and excellent teaching is what builds those connections. We look forward to playing a part in ISU’s continued focus on building and enhancing teaching and building these connections.

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