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Overwhelmed

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OVERWHELMED Tracy Dicks

Why Students Drop – According to Students

Ted McFerrin as dictated to R. Scott Yarbrough

EDITOR'S NOTE: **THIS PIECE WAS TED'S FINAL PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATION TO THE TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE TEACHER'S ASSOCIATION.** AT THE TIME, TED WAS IN THE FINAL BATTLE WITH CANCER AND PREFERRED TO STAY BUSY AND IN THE LOOP. THE PAPER WAS READ IN HIS STEAD AT THE CONFERENCE. IT SHOULD BE MENTIONED, TED NEVER "GAVE UP" ON ANY STUDENT.

WE ALL KNOW THE PROBLEM: STUDENTS DROP, **BUT WE'RE NEVER QUITE SURE WHY.** My colleague, Ted McFerrin undertook this study under duress; three of his five classes had come under scrutiny by administration due to drop rates. Ted is a good teacher and is well-liked and has a good reputation. Therefore, part of the original thought was that the courses were troubled simply because of the nature of the offering: the course was Technical Writing, and several were coupled with Distance Learning. Still, Ted could feel an administrative push to find an answer and "fix it." Thus, I thought it rather brave for Ted to see the research as a challenge rather than as a direct personal insult; we all have students drop.

Ted first approached the problem by looking to the experts, current research, and trends, assuming through statistics he might find a plug-in, pat answer. Becoming increasingly frustrated by the fact that Ted felt that the research continued to exhibit an attitude that was "certainly the professor must be the cause of the waning numbers," Ted decided to do something rather radical and proactive. His question: why not ask the real students who drop the real reasons they drop and what can/could the college do/or have done to change/or alter that decision?

Research and Ted's study revealed some overlapping conclusions; obviously, certain responsibilities fall on the shoulders of the faculty, advising, admissions, financial aid, and administration, and each group is quick to point the finger while ignoring the thumb that is pointed back at themselves: "Surely it must be the faculty." "Surely it must be the students. Kids these days." "Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven't been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know." "Advising must have dropped the ball." All could very well be true; the student may have dropped because of a lack of discipline on their part, or they may have disliked the instruction or instructor, or they may have changed majors, or a work schedule, or received misguided advising, or been dropped for lack of payment, or had boyfriend/girlfriend problems, classes too early, or classes too late, or the teacher might have been "mean." Still, there was more. Mixed with this myriad of excuses or shortfalls, some of the evidence is contradictory, an oxymoron unto itself: half the students want more attention while the other half want less; the instructor is not tough enough or the instructor is too difficult; or the teacher is too reactive or too proactive; or the teacher stays on the subject too much or the teacher strays from the subject, or the teacher is too personal or not personal enough. WHAT TO DO?