From the Director

Greetings,

Wow! It’s hard to believe another academic year is just about in our rearview mirrors. As the 2009 commencement ceremony approaches, I would like to congratulate all of our graduating students for all of their hard work and accomplishments. I also urge all of our graduates to take some time and enjoy the fruits of your labor. Attaining your degree required years of commitment and sacrifice, so before you tackle your next challenge, make sure you set some time aside for reflection and celebration!

I also would like to thank this month’s guest writer Andre D’Artagnan. Andre, who serves as an English and Humanities instructor here at MMCC, has provided us with some powerful thoughts concerning retention and its impact on higher education. Lastly, I just want to give a quick thanks to all of our great faculty and staff for making this past year an enjoyable one.

Andre D’Artagnan Guest Writer

Can I get there from here? Maybe!

Deciding can be quite a challenge. Significant for any discussion to be meaningful is having a contextual understanding of the discourse. What is your there, expressed as goals or objectives, while here is more than physical location it refers to your skills and behaviors. Retention generally refers to holding or keeping, conversely attrition relates to reduction. By considering retention or attrition, beyond statistics, as the product of cumulative events brings the focus to the people involved, and possible contributing factors leading to either outcome. Regardless of your own course of action, until you evaluate your here and determine what there is, the journey will likely not be completed. Do you know where you are and where you are going? Or for that matter why you want to go wherever it is you have chosen to go?

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” — Aristotle

Recently, I heard the insurance giant AIG was defending their position for paying their best and brightest exorbitant bonuses to keep those employees in the fold. Based on the questionable performance of those particular employees - especially the outcomes - if they represent the best and brightest in the field of finance and investment, all of us are in for a rough ride. While having experience and expertise usually is a reassurance, in this case the performance, like the standards for assessing excellence, is open for deeper critical analysis. It is under the light of closer scrutiny that, sometimes the process of retention is more ludicrous than sensible.

“You cannot push anyone up a ladder unless he be willing to climb himself.”

— Andrew Carnegie

However, retention is no less discordant in the halls of academia while at the whim of legislators and administrators. Along with standardized testing and the student head count day, the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act has muddled quantity for quality. Without regular school attendance and serious effort there is little chance for a student to progress. The “one-size-fits-all” model with minimum accountability has opened a Pandora’s Box of inconsistencies. Recently, some state school districts have been recognized not for their excellence but for falsifying their enrollment numbers. Chasing the funding dollars has a cascading effect on budget shortfalls and escalates the negative influence to our current financial debacle. To fund schools and programs purely based on head counts and test scores is just another numbers game. Whatever happened to funding based on quality performance or excellence where students, graduates, or employees add value, integrity, and credibility for the greater benefit to an institution and society?

“Be the difference you want to see in the world”

— Mahatma Gandhi

For example I had an academic advisor and primary professor, known as the “weed-whacker” while undergoing the rigors of an undergraduate degree at LSSU.

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This man had a gas-powered string grass trimmer prominently displayed on the wall of his closet-sized office. He had a reputation for intolerance, in other words his standards for acceptance into the program and the demands on student performance were consummate; either you met the expectations or you would be cut. Retention was determined according to one's performance, persistence, and excellence. Despite the apparent deviation from the open-door policies of many other institutions, the standards imposed indicated the caliber of excellence deemed necessary for the credibility of the discipline. Membership paralleled an unrivaled familiarity to another certain fraternity; earned, not given - "the few, the proud, the Marines" - Semper Fi.

“It’s not enough we do our best; sometimes we have to do what’s required.”
--Sir Winston Churchill

General education (Gen Ed) requirements are usually and unfortunately considered as unnecessary and a waste of time by many students. But what do Gen Ed’s have to do with the discussion about retention? It is here where retention comes in direct conflict with attrition. For some freshman English students the week following Spring Break is a major stumbling block, simply due to the serious lack of consideration student’s give to the first draft of their portfolio. In the weeks prior to this epiphemic moment, students have been engaged in a simple but not easy process of writing two essays. Each student, there are approximately three-hundred students, submits two essays to be reviewed by a team of readers for a single day of critical evaluation. The outcomes are often painfully clear as students either lack interest, procrastinate, become indignant, or just exercise futility. Exceptions do occur, when a reviewer reads a particularly well-written passage to a joyous chorus of recognition. However, more often this process presents such a formidable challenge that class rosters witness an increase in attrition or drop-out rates.

“Obstacles can’t stop you. Problems can’t stop you. Most of all, other people can’t stop you. Only you can stop you.”
--Author Unknown

Engaging in this discourse is far from easy, yet it can be simple and straightforward. Why are you pursuing the career or program you are choosing? Begin with being realistic and passionate with defining your purpose, visions, and goals. A key before embarking on this or any path is an honest look at the options. What are my choices and challenges? Do my skills and determination match what is required? My undergraduate degree is in exercise science/athletic training (sports medicine). I had a determination and passion for the applied science of this field following the years of incurring repetitive occupational injuries. That sense of ownership came from undergoing years of rehabilitation. In order to direct my therapy I needed to become familiar with modalities and physical therapy techniques. With this information I based my argument against surgical intervention. However, there were ancillary costs. The implementation of a physical movement regime in an aquatic environment was not well received. Doctors and Physical Therapists opted to discharge me from the roster of occupational injuries. My next move was to a new department to develop exercise protocols for employees with the objective of reducing on-the-job injuries. After more than seventeen years on the production line it was time to leave.

“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”
--George Bernard Shaw

General education classes form the material to build a foundation. To develop your skills in communication and critical thinking is paramount and these integral skills are evident in every profession. Having a working knowledgeable ability for utilizing those skills often open doors to opportunities including advancement. Are you prepared, willing, and able to endure the obstacles - even disappointments - that might impede progress? By entertaining the concept that a requirement or activity is a waste of time is simply underestimating or ignoring its value now and in your future. Whose responsibility is your education, and your future? You are the driver of your life. You have options and accompanying choices and decisions, have you got a passion, purpose, and plan? You are the result of many influences and experiences, a masterpiece that you have created.