

## Innovative Practice

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### **An innovative intervention for students failing to meet academic standards: the Bounce Back Retention Program case study**

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#### **Summary**

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) recently changed its student academic performance standards and created a system of intervention for students failing to meet those standards. A key component of this intervention is the Bounce Back Retention Program. In this program, students failing to meet academic standards participate in weekly group meetings to explore how to become more resilient in the face of scholastic and personal stress. Through experiential activities, students explore the multiple interacting factors influencing their academic performance. The Bounce Back Retention Program is part of a larger initiative to take an ecological approach to student success at UNC-CH.

This case study describes the development and the implementation of the Bounce Back Retention

Program in the context of the larger institutional initiatives, including changing academic policies, to increase undergraduate retention and graduation.

#### **Institutional context**

Enrolling 17,700 undergraduate students and 10,500 graduate students, UNC-CH offers study in more than 100 fields including bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees as well as professional degrees in dentistry, medicine, pharmacy and law. Located in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and chartered in 1789, UNC-CH was the first public university established in the United States. Of the university's undergraduate students, 80 per cent are from the state of North Carolina. In 2005, the university's Chancellor set goals for raising graduation rates. The rate for students taking 4 years to graduate should increase from 71 to 75 per cent and that for students taking 6 years to graduate, from 84 to 87 per cent by 2010.

Students at the university are housed in the College of Arts and Sciences for the first two years of study. The academic advising (personal tutoring) program for these students is centralized. Students are advised by both full-time professional advisors and part-time faculty advisors in a central location on campus. After the second year, students may enter a professional school such as the Business School, the School of Education or the School of Journalism. If a student declares a major such as English, History or Romance Languages, the student will stay in the College of Arts and Sciences. Students that enter a professional school are advised by advisors in their professional schools. All other students continue to utilize the centralized academic advising program housed in the College of Arts and Sciences. Students in the College of Arts and Sciences who are failing to meet academic standards are encouraged to join a group called Bounce Back. This group is lead by mental health professionals who work on campus. The mental health professionals collaborate with the academic advisors to help students return to good academic standing through weekly group meetings with the students.

#### **A time for change**

Prior to 2007, UNC-CH did not have a formal system of intervention for students failing to meet academic performance standards. Students were considered eligible or ineligible to register for courses based on their cumulative grade point average. Ineligible students (students not meeting the required grade point average) were not permitted to enroll in fall

or spring semesters, the traditional semesters for students at UNC-CH. An abbreviated semester is also offered during the summer. While ineligible students cannot attend fall or spring semesters, they can register for the summer semester but this is not desirable.

With the implementation of a new academic policy, students failing to meet performance standards may register for one fall or spring semester in order to attempt to return to good academic standing during that semester. The new policy was implemented based on recommendations from a university-wide study of the institution's retention policies, services and procedures (Retention Study Group, 2004). The study was led by a campus-wide committee called the Retention Study Group and conducted by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. The study found that students attributed failure to persist at the university to multiple interacting factors ranging from familial relations to financial insecurity, lack of motivation and attention disorders (Retention Study Group, 2004). It became evident that a program of intervention for students failing to meet academic performance standards that would help students reflect on multiple interacting factors was needed. The system of intervention was thus created not to be punitive, but to provide a one semester opportunity for students to examine these factors and determine strategies for success.

The retention study's focus on multiple interacting factors led intervention stakeholders to identify ecological systems theory as the theoretical framework for the development of the intervention. In ecological systems theory, individuals develop in relation to the ever-changing environments of their home, family, school, community and society (Berk, 2007). Multiple interacting factors across these settings are examined to explain human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The individual and the environment are in a reciprocal relationship in which the individual is affected by as well as affects the settings in which he or she spends time (Berk, 2007). Because students indicated multiple interacting factors across settings as the cause of poor academic performance and because the ecological perspective finds that human development occurs through interactions among multiple settings, applying this developmental theory to the university's student success practices was an appropriate fit. It was determined that any intervention program that was instituted must have an ecological approach to student success.

The Bounce Back Retention Program, originally developed at San Diego State University (Hanger et al., 2007), was selected as a key component of the retention intervention because it addresses multiple interacting factors and relationships across settings influencing student success.

### **Detailed description of intervention**

The Bounce Back Retention Program is a program where small groups of approximately ten to twelve students struggling academically meet on a weekly basis. All students failing to meet performance standards are encouraged to join a Bounce Back group. Each group follows a curriculum designed to teach academic-related skills including study skills, time management and learning styles, while enhancing students' resiliency by addressing personal as well as psychological issues. While the curriculum is defined, group instructors are trained to be flexible with the curriculum content in order to respond to unique student needs.

Bounce Back classes are experiential. In each class, students are encouraged to self-reflect on obstacles and to address challenges in order to persist academically. The activities are designed to develop resiliency traits. These traits include persistence, motivation, optimism, confidence, emotion regulation, decisive risk taking, self-efficacy and altruism (Hanger et al., 2007). The Bounce Back Retention Program is grounded in positive psychology and resiliency theory (Hanger et al., 2007). Both theories offer a 'strength-based' orientation. Rather than emphasizing limitations, pathology or barriers, positive psychology and resiliency theory identify individual strengths and accomplishments (Banyard and Cantor, 2004; Beasley et al., 2003; Fassig, 2004; Shields, 2001). Bounce Back, therefore, focuses on students' successes and encourages an optimistic perspective.

The Bounce Back program takes an ecological approach to student success. The student is viewed as an individual affected by and affecting the environment. The interactions among the student's multiple environments of home, family, school, community and society are seen as key to promoting persistence, resiliency and academic success. Bounce Back helps students better understand themselves in relation to these ever changing ecological systems. In the ecological approach, participation in social relationships is required for development. Bounce Back encourages the development of social

relationships among participants. Students are encouraged to share their unique experiences and to learn from their peers as well as from a peer coach. Often students in the program connect quickly to their peers in the group because they identify with each other and know what it is like to struggle academically. The peer coach adds credibility to the curriculum, models successful behaviours and normalizes help-seeking behaviour. Because of the connections that build out of this shared experience, Bounce Back participants may utilize the group as a support network. The sense of community that grows out of this experience helps students feel more connected to the university, reduces the shame and stigma associated with asking for help, and demonstrates to students that the university cares and is concerned about their success (Hanger et al., 2007). The relationships among individuals in each class are central to the success of the group as a whole.

### **Reflections**

During the implementation of the Bounce Back Retention Program, the stakeholders carefully considered whether the program should be voluntary or mandatory. Ultimately, it was determined that participation for students at UNC-CH would be voluntary. Faculty and non-teaching staff felt that if the program was mandatory, students' motivation and willingness to participate in group activities would decline. The drawback of this decision was that the students that joined the group were self-selective and likely to be more motivated than other students. This makes it challenging to measure the effectiveness of the intervention. Any institution considering adopting the Bounce Back Retention Program will have to grapple with this decision.

Another challenge was maintaining student interest and commitment to the program. As students started to perform better in their courses, some would stop coming to the weekly meetings. It was a challenge to encourage continued participation for the twelve week duration of the program. A variety of techniques were employed to encourage students to continue to attend including providing incentives to participants, sending email reminders and having peer mentors contact students.

At UNC-CH, Bounce Back is offered as a non-credit course. At San Diego State University, where the program was originally developed, it is offered as a one-credit course. Stakeholders at San Diego State University believe that this encourages continued attendance throughout the duration of the program.

A school considering implementing this intervention will want to work with their academic departments to determine whether or not it is appropriate to deliver the program as a credited course.

The Bounce Back Retention Program is based on a curriculum, and students must purchase a book covering this curriculum. The cost of the book was a deterrent for some students to sign up for the program. Once this became clear, stakeholders applied for a grant to cover the cost of the books. A school considering this intervention should assess this cost and the influence it may have on participation before starting the program.

### **Effectiveness of intervention or change**

Of the students who regularly participated in the Bounce Back Retention Program at UNC-CH, 60 per cent returned to good academic standing at the end of the intervention.

### **Limitations**

There are important limitations to acknowledge. The effectiveness of the Bounce Back Retention Program is strongly influenced by continuous attendance and participation. Students who missed several meetings did not perform as well as students that regularly attended the meetings.

Additionally, if there is not continual and effective communication between the mental health professionals and the academic advisors facilitating the program, the intervention may be less successful, with fewer students returning to good academic standing. It is also imperative that the individual group instructors are well trained. Instructors who are better skilled at implementing the curriculum and working with students may have better results.

### **Future developments**

Faculty and non-teaching staff at UNC-CH have expressed interest in seeing the Bounce Back Retention Program, or something similar, offered to all students rather than just those failing to meet academic performance standards. Program stakeholders are exploring ways to bring elements of the Bounce Back Retention Program to the larger student community.

### **Useful links**

Information on academic standards and the program of intervention discussed in this case study can

be found at <http://www.studentsuccess.unc.edu>. Information on the Bounce Back Retention Program can be found at [http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/cps/bounce\\_back-manuals-etc.html](http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/cps/bounce_back-manuals-etc.html).

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