

# **Sabbatical Summary Statement**

## **Gina D. Walls, Sabbatical in Fall 2004**

### **Report Prepared in September 2005**

#### **Introduction**

As a product of the community college myself, I have long been interested in the factors that effect student persistence - in what helps a community college student stay in college. As a Parkland faculty member, I have been interested in developing programs and activities that would improve student persistence. Out of this interest, ORN 101 was created and implemented at Parkland in 1992. ORN 101 (renamed PSY 109 in 2004) is an orientation to college course which includes topics such as goal setting, educational planning, and career and personal development. In the fall of 1993, I began my doctoral dissertation researching the possible impact that ORN 101 might have on student persistence. The results of that research indicated that students who successfully completed ORN 101 had modestly higher persistence rates than similar students who did not enroll in ORN 101. In other words, students who completed ORN 101 were more likely to return to college in the subsequent semester than those who didn't take ORN 101. (Walls dissertation on file in the Parkland library.) Ever since the dissertation was completed in 1996, I wanted to return to my research on student persistence at the community college, but other responsibilities took precedence. My sabbatical leave was a useful and profitable experience; it allowed me time to take the research on ORN 101/PSY 109 further and renewed my commitment to the community college student. I would like to thank Parkland for making both the research and the renewal possible.

#### **Goals Achieved**

1. I brought my knowledge up-to-date on the correlates of student persistence in the community college via a literature review focused on the impact of orientation to college courses. Based on recent research, there is ample empirical evidence demonstrating that orientation to college courses are correlated with improved student persistence in community colleges. (Bibliography available on request.)
2. I reviewed the past data on the correlation between student persistence and successful completion of ORN 101/PSY 109 for Parkland students as found by Parkland's Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation. Research conducted in 2004 which compiled 12 years of data indicated that successful completion of ORN 101/PSY 109 was positively correlated with improved semester-to-semester persistence of Parkland students. (Report available in Parkland's Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation.)

3. I conducted focus groups with PSY 109 students and analyzed the results to assess the needs of incoming students.
4. In cooperation with an external evaluator provided by Parkland's Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation (summer intern Doug Brooks), I analyzed the answers to PSY 109 final exam questions to determine what the students may have gained by participating in PSY 109.
5. I worked in cooperation with Sharon Kristovich in Parkland's Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation (OIRE) to refine the analysis of ORN 101/PSY 109's impact on student persistence at Parkland. A matched sample was developed, but OIRE staff were needed on other projects before we were finished with our discussions and analysis. We hope to return to this research at a later date.
6. I renewed my commitment to Parkland students and teaching. I didn't just choose teaching as a profession; I chose teaching at Parkland for a profession. Perhaps because I was once one myself, I have a special affinity for the community college student. Because of what I have learned during this sabbatical, I have refreshed my compassion for students and gained new insight into the battles they fight and the barriers to learning they face. I plan to use what I have learned to improve the PSY 109 course and assist in the design of programs and courses that will help foster student persistence.

### **Research Design and Questions**

The data for my research came from two different sources. The first source of data came from focus group interviews with students in PSY 109 courses at the beginning of the semester. The research question was really quite simple and guided the development of the specific focus group questions.

Question 1) What do new students think and how do they feel about entering college?

The second source of data was derived from final exams taken by PSY 109 completers at the end of the semester. The research questions directed the analysis of the student responses to the PSY 109 final exam questions.

Question 2) What attitude or behavioral changes do successful completers of PSY 109 observe in themselves?

Question 3) How do students describe the impact of PSY 109?

The research followed a pretest, post test research design. One source of data came right at the beginning of the semester, before the intervention of PSY 109, and the other source came at the end of the semester, after the intervention of PSY 109.

## Analysis of Data from Focus Groups

I conducted focus groups with students enrolled in eight of the ten PSY 109 classes during the fall of 2004. The discussions were held during the second week of classes and involved 120 students who volunteered to participate. In preparation for the discussion, students were given an informal survey which consisted of the focus group questions. They were asked to spend a few minutes jotting down their answers. The analysis made use of the verbal focus group responses supplemented by the written responses. The primary goal of the analysis was to document the issues or problems students faced as they started college. As a check on reliability, all the responses were analyzed by both myself and by a summer intern (Doug Gardner) contracted by OIRE. While there were some differences in our methods and interpretation of the data, in general we found similar themes. In the interests of brevity, I have presented here only my findings. In Tables 1-3, I've presented my analysis of the three major focus group questions. For each, student comments were transcribed into a word processing program and then grouped according to similar themes.

Table 1: Focus Group Question - *"What did you most look forward to as you prepared to enter college?"* (268 total comments)

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Theme Description and Samples of Student Quotes</b>	<b>Number and % of comments</b>
<b>Personal Development</b>	Comments related to being more independent, responsible, and growing as a person.  "Living on my own." "Starting my future and adult life." "Being responsible and on my own, out of my parents' reach." "I look forward to being a better person."	n = 118  <b>44.0%</b>
<b>Social</b>	Comments related to meeting new people, making new friends, and other social goals.  "Meeting new people." "Make some friends and stop being shy." "New experiences."	n = 82  <b>30.6%</b>
<b>Academic</b>	Comments related to academics or education, includes comments about professors, improving academic/learning skills, making good grades, learning new information, etc.  "Meeting new teachers and getting to know them." "Learning about my interests and goals." "Getting an education."	n = 46  <b>17.2%</b>
<b>Career</b>	Comments related to careers or degrees.  "Starting a new career." "Getting an engineering degree." "Earning a degree." "Getting a real title besides mother." "Getting an education to get a different job so I can spend more time with my family."	n = 22  <b>8.2%</b>

Table 2: Focus Group Question - *"What were you most concerned about as you prepared to enter college?"* (247 total comments)

Theme	Theme Description and Samples of Student Quotes	Number and % of comments
<b>Social</b>	Comments related to concerns about meeting new people, making new friends, and leaving friends and family.  "Not making friends." "Leaving my family." "If people were going to make fun of me." "Not fitting in." "Not knowing who to trust." "How young people treat one another."	n = 41  <b>16.6 %</b>
<b>Management of time, study, and course- work</b>	Comments related to time management, balancing responsibilities, studying, etc.  "Managing my time." "Not having enough time to study." "Will I be able to balance my life with school, achieve my academics, understand my classes and pass?"	n = 38  <b>15.4 %</b>
<b>Difficulty of academic work</b>	Comments related to concerns about difficulty of degrees and courses.  "That it was going to be too hard or I was going to be too stupid."	n = 34  <b>13.8 %</b>
<b>Personal and academic confidence</b>	Comments related to concerns about being more independent and responsible, and concerns about motivation and lack of academic confidence.  "That I would sell myself short." "Getting motivated to go to class." "Having no one to talk to or run to when I needed help." "That I'm not college material." "Feeling stupid." "Becoming homesick." "Disappointing my parents."	n = 30  <b>12.1 %</b>
<b>Failure</b>	Comments related to concerns about failure.  "Afraid I wouldn't succeed." "Failing classes."	n = 27  <b>10.9 %</b>
<b>Finances</b>	Comments related to concerns about money.  "Not having enough money." "Worried about money and keeping my job."	n = 26  <b>10.5 %</b>

<b>Adapting to environment</b>	Comments related to figuring out how to get around in a new environment.  "Getting lost." "Getting adapted to my environment."	n = 17  <b>6.9 %</b>
<b>Grades</b>	Comments related to concerns about grades.  "Not getting good grades."	n = 15  <b>6.1 %</b>
<b>Other concerns</b>	Comments related to other academic concerns.  "I would get lost in all the work." "Not knowing what I truly want."	n = 9  <b>3.6 %</b>
<b>Tests</b>	Comments related to concerns about testing.	n = 5  <b>3.6 %</b>
<b>Professors</b>	Comments related to concerns about professors.  "Having bad professors." "Rude teachers."	n = 5  <b>3.6 %</b>

Table 3: Focus Group Question - *"Think about the process of applying to Parkland and enrolling in classes. Also think about attending your classes so far. What has most surprised you about the experience?"* (138 total comments)

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Theme Description and Samples of Student Quotes</b> (Note that about 70% of the comments could be categorized as positive comments.)	<b>Number and % of comments</b>
<b>Ease of adjustment to college environment/ structure</b>	Comments related to the ease of adjustment to college environment or structure.  "Parkland is pretty easy to get around once you learn it." "Laid back atmosphere." "The rules are easy-going, clothes, hats, etc." "It is like high school, but with more freedom and a lot more people." "How quickly I have adapted." "I caught on and learned not to be afraid to ask questions, participate and open up to new people." "I have a lot more responsibility." "You're treated like an adult."	n = 29  <b>21.0 %</b>
<b>Academically more rewarding</b>	Comments related to classes being easier or more enjoyable than expected.  "My classes seem easy." "That I enjoy returning to school." "That I have been doing so good in my math class which is my worst subject." "How much I like PSY." "It is not as bad as I thought it would be. It turns out to be interesting, fun, and exciting. I look forward to coming every day."	n = 26  <b>18.8 %</b>

<b>Concerns about entering or adjusting to college</b>	Comments related to the difficulties in adjustment to college environment or structure and comments related to the perceived difficulties in the registration process.  "I didn't know applying would be so involved." "How much I don't feel like going to class sometimes."	n = 14  <b>10.1 %</b>
<b>Helpful professors</b>	Comments related to helpfulness, kindness of teachers.  "The thing I like the most is the teachers because they want to teach, not just get a paycheck." "Instructors are really cool. They don't treat you like you're dumb and get mad if people don't understand and ask over and over about a question." "Teachers help you when you need it."	n = 13  <b>9.4 %</b>
<b>Quality of resources and help</b>	Comments related to resources and help for students.  "Tutoring is available free." "I was surprised about all the help that is given around Parkland."	n = 12  <b>8.7 %</b>
<b>Concerns about academic success</b>	Comments related to concerns about not doing well.  "Not doing well in my classes." "How easy it is to get caught up in parties instead of school." "How much homework you get in math."	n = 10  <b>7.2 %</b>
<b>Social observations</b>	Comments related to the diversity and number of people at Parkland.  "The diverse types of people." "Seeing different races besides my own." "All the different age groups." "How many people there are here."	n = 10  <b>7.2 %</b>
<b>Ease of registration process</b>	Comments related to the ease of the registration process.  "How easy it was to get help in registering." "How quick the process was." "What surprised me was how much help I received coming in."	n = 9  <b>6.5 %</b>
<b>Ease of social relations</b>	Comments related to ease of social relations.  "How easy it has been to get along with others." "How nice the students were."	n = 6  <b>4.3 %</b>
<b>Concerns about social relations</b>	Comments related to concerns about social relations.  "How cold and distant some students seem." "How rude some people are."	n = 5  <b>3.6 %</b>
<b>Financial matters</b>	Comments both positive and negative about financial matters.  "I got the scholarship and a work study job!" "I'm so broke I have to work twice as hard to go here."	n = 4  <b>2.9 %</b>

## **Analysis of Data from PSY 109 Final Exam Questions**

Students in PSY 109 complete a final exam consisting of five essay questions asking students to describe what they have learned as a consequence of their participation in PSY 109. (The final exam questions are available on request.) Seventy-two students who completed final exams from eight (of 10) sections of PSY 109 granted permission to use their responses in this analysis. As a Parkland College outsider, the OIRE summer intern (Doug Gardner) organized the data for this portion of the research using Atlas Ti, a qualitative data analysis program. Answers to each of the five final exam questions were analyzed separately, and then conclusions were drawn summarizing the findings. The guiding questions for the analysis were: 1) What attitude or behavioral changes do successful completers of PSY 109 observe in themselves? and 2) How do students describe the impact of PSY 109?

### **Findings**

1. The most prevalent theme was one of personal development. Students are interested in self-improvement and want to increase their self-discipline, goal setting skills, independence, and time-management skills. Students realize they are now on their own and must begin to take more responsibility for their decisions. Through class exercises, students became aware of the time and money they waste and were able to learn better ways to manage time and resources.
2. Another key theme was one of increased self-knowledge. The students demonstrated a great amount of introspection and self-analysis. They reflected deeply on their strengths and challenges and identified ways in which they could use their strengths to their benefit and ways they might overcome their challenges. Some students indicated that they felt more confident in their ability to succeed in college and life as a result of completing PSY 109.
3. Recognizing the connection between education and career is a third dominant theme arising out of student responses. Students began to see an education to career continuum that directly connected education in the short-term to career success in the future. Students understood that they needed to attend class, turn in homework, learn from teachers and get good grades because success in these areas would directly impact eventual achievement of their career goals. As a result of their participation in this class, students began to see the bigger picture of why they are in college.
4. A minor, but notable theme was the students' desire to look outward beyond themselves to helping and serving others. As a result of their new knowledge and skills, a few students expressed a desire to participate in community services organizations or help other students. Though not a dominant theme, its presence indicates a potential direction for development of the curriculum of PSY 109.

## Conclusions

From the analysis of focus group questions (our pretest), we have a better idea of some of the concerns of our incoming students. Many truly lack both social and academic self-confidence. Efforts to help students succeed should center on helping them develop these necessary confidences. This includes helping them better understand the college environment and what is expected of a college student; connecting them with supportive teachers, peers, and organizations; and assisting them in developing requisite academic, social, and life skills.

From the analysis of responses to final exam questions (our post test), we can determine ways to improve PSY 109. The analysis also assured us that PSY 109 is accomplishing what it purports to do - academic, personal, and career development. Indeed, if we look back at the themes of the first focus group question (Table 1) and depict them in a pie chart, we can see the connection between the primary conclusions above and the areas that students enter college knowing they need to develop.

Figure 1: Focus Group Question: "What did you most look forward to as you prepared to enter college." (268 total comments)

