

Griffith Honours College, a centralised approach to student engagement: Creating a sense of belonging to the university community

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Ways to maximise student engagement continues to be a topic of concern for universities (James, 2001). This workshop uses Griffith Honours College (GHC) as a case study for attracting and retaining high achieving undergraduate students. Firstly, the facilitator will present the students' perceptions about university study, what attracted them to Griffith and the GHC and what influenced them to accept the additional workload with no credit towards their undergraduate program. Secondly, student feedback on which GHC activities have been most effective in increasing their sense of belonging to the University community will be presented. Lastly, and most importantly, the participants will be asked to offer strategies that would not only assist Griffith to build on the GHC students' high level of engagement and sense of belonging to the University community but also may be used at their own universities to increase undergraduate student engagement.

Addressing 'student detachment' or, as others have termed it, 'student disengagement' continues to be a topic of concern for universities (James, 2001). 'An increasingly competitive higher education environment makes it necessary for Griffith University to find ways to more effectively use limited resources to maximise outcomes for both individual students and the institution as a whole' (Student Retention Project, 2003, p.5). Griffith Honours College (GHC) is part of a three tiered approach to not only attract high achieving students but also to retain them through an enriched university experience. The facilitator at this Nuts and Bolts workshop will present data on students' perceptions about university study, and the influence that their involvement with GHC has had on their sense of belonging to the University community and engagement with their learning. Analysis of data identifies what the cohort of high achieving first year students are seeking from their university study and what influenced them to voluntarily take on an additional workload that has no credit points contributing towards their undergraduate program. The interactive session will focus on how participants might use the student feedback to increase student engagement at their own university, and most importantly, what strategies might be used in the future to build on the outcomes achieved to date. To achieve a win-win result, on the one hand, the University needs strategies that will encourage students to increase their sense of belonging to the University community and become ambassadors for Griffith. On the other hand the students need to become engaged with their own learning and maintain excellent academic achievements.

The Honours College experience has been created to allow students to reach their full potential and differentiate them from their peers upon graduation. Thus, the aim of GHC is to offer activities that will quickly engage the students in their university studies through developing and maintaining their sense of belonging to the University community. In 2008, the GHC opened its doors to 120 active students. The cohort that was successful in gaining membership achieved Overall Position Scores of 1 to 3. In addition, these students demonstrated in their application that they had taken on leadership roles at their schools or within their communities. Whilst it is anticipated that many GHC students will do further study, the GHC is not directly associated with the University's undergraduate honours degree program. It is a virtual college, advised by academics volunteering their services, that invites

high achieving students to participate in enriching experiences in conjunction with their undergraduate studies. It is designed to provide talented students with skills and qualities in high demand by employers – leadership, teamwork, a global perspective, civic responsibility, research, and industry experience.

Since 1950 the first year of tertiary education has been a keen subject of research in Australia. Early experiences with tertiary education are pivotal in establishing values, attitudes, and approaches to learning that will last throughout students' tertiary experiences, and beyond (McInnis & James, 1995). In some researchers' views, completion of the first year is 'more than half the battle' in persistence to degree completion (Tinto, 1988, p.49). The processes by which students come to identify with and become members of, a study community have been likened to the processes by which individuals ascend from youth to adult status in traditional societies, or by which migrant peoples are accepted in a new community. It is during the stage of becoming members of the new community that students may be at greatest risk in terms of withdrawing from study altogether or from a particular institution (Tinto, 1988).

With declining numbers in applications across the Queensland tertiary sector, directly reflecting on Griffith's quantity and quality of student cohort, a review of data was undertaken. Enrolment figures show that many high achieving students in the catchment area have not placed Griffith as the first choice University. The recent Learning and Teaching Performance Funds outcomes show that the University has performed poorly by national standards on student retention and graduate outcomes. These outcomes may impact not only on the University's reputation and student recruitment but also on the aspirations and life chances of our students. This risk is identified in the University's Strategic Plan, which sets specific targets for improvement in retention. In 2002, the University established the Student Retention Project which recommended that efforts to improve retention and increase high achieving entry students be 'frontloaded' to the first year. The Project also stressed the importance of a 'whole of University approach'. These were the drivers to establish GHC.

McInnes (2001, p13) states that 'while the role of student responsibility in their learning and development cannot be overlooked, universities have the obligation to ensure that students are obliged to engage and understand the significance of the need to commit. More significantly perhaps is the importance of social and academic intergration of students in 'learning communities' (Tinto, 1997), that brings the role of the university and its process more sharply into focus. Therefore, the challenge for universities is not only to identify what encourages students to feel as though they belong to the University community but also to deliver activities that will increase their engagement and motivate them to become life long learners.

Data has been gathered to identify:-

1. students' reasons for choosing Griffith as their undergraduate university
2. students' reasons for accepting the offer to become a member of GHC
3. what difficulties the students perceive they will have in their transition to university (using prompts from Tinto's 1988 work)
4. what the students wish to achieve through being a member of GHC
5. how useful have the GHC activities been to date in making students feel engaged with the university community

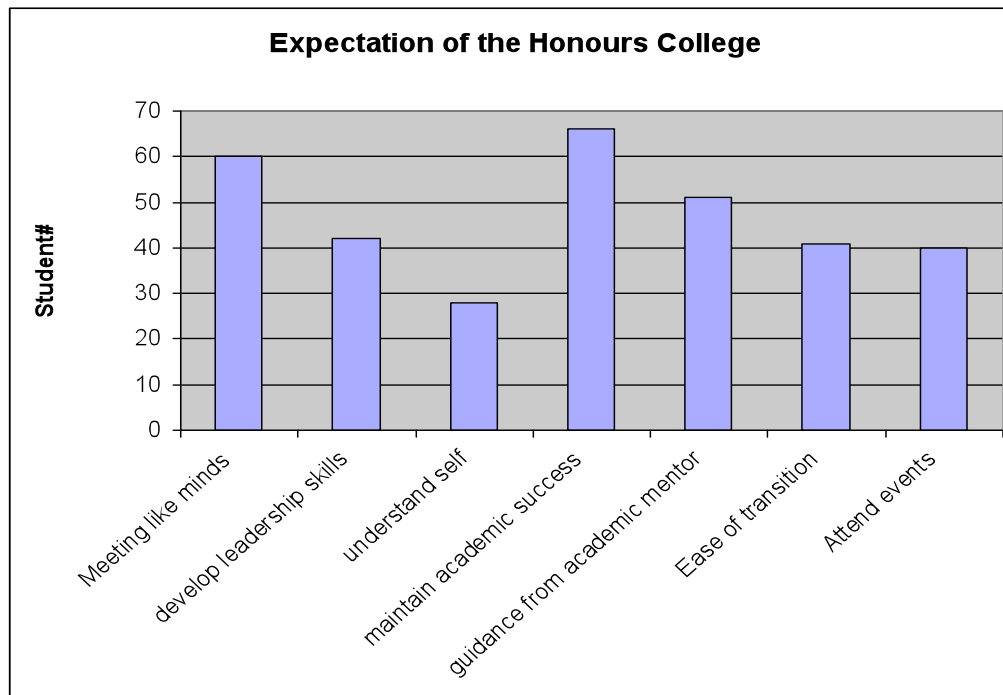


Figure 1. Expectations through being a member of the Griffith Honours College

The workshop will outline the GHC vision and the objectives of the strategies to date. Students were unanimous that these activities have made them feel a strong sense of belonging to the University community. Interestingly, in response to the question ‘What difficulties do you perceive impact on student attrition, the students reported, ‘under-prepared, unrealistic expectations and lack of focus’. The majority of the GHC students, however, did not perceive that they would have these difficulties. Given the students’ expectations through being a member of GHC, refer Figure 1, and the University’s goal to increase this high achieving cohort’s sense of belonging to the University community, this Nuts and Bolts workshop will focus on future opportunities that could be offered that would build on the students’ engagement with their own learning.

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