Empowering Students. The Spiritan Division at Duquesne

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Introduction
Duquesne University is a private Catholic four year plus graduate university with an approximate enrollment of 10,500 including graduate students. It was founded in 1878 by the Holy Ghost Fathers, now called the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans). It is located in an urban setting on 49 acres on a hilltop overlooking the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Nine schools comprise the University: Liberal Arts, Natural and Environmental Sciences, and seven professional schools including Law, Business, Pharmacy, Music, Education, Nursing, and Health Sciences. Duquesne’s mission is to serve God through serving students with “Education for the Mind, Heart, and Spirit”.

U.S. News & World Report’s 2015 National University Rankings placed Duquesne University tied at 116 among more than 1,800 colleges and ranked it 14 among the 50 best Catholic universities in the nation. Princeton Review’s The Best 379 Colleges recommends Duquesne as one of the country’s best institutions for undergraduate education. Thriving within this setting is a first-and-second-year experience program, the Robert and Patricia Gussin Spiritan Division of Academic Programs (henceforth, Division), committed to providing access to talented students who might otherwise be overlooked, and thus giving creative expression to one of the University’s stated mission goals “to extend educational opportunities to those with special financial, educational, and physical needs” (Duquesne University Undergraduate Catalog, 1994). This is one way in which the university expresses the Spiritan Congregation’s charism of “evangelization of the poor” (cf. Luke 4:18) and empowering of the weak.

History: Development of the Division
Cultural shifts are often met with resistance, and the one that the introduction of the Spiritan Division represented was no different. In 1994, the director of the Learning Skills Center submitted a proposal for the development of the Spiritan Division to the university president and the provost and academic vice president. The Division would be another means to realize the University mission “to extend educational opportunities to those with special financial, educational, and physical needs”
One of the early responses to the proposed Division was the opposition of certain faculty and academic units to the admission of students who did not meet the traditional University norms for SAT scores and high school grade point averages for admission. The concern was that the admission of students considered academically under-prepared and whose profiles were below university standards in reality meant that those standards were lowered. How would such at-risk students be able to perform successfully?

The problem of bias against this at-risk population was addressed by the timely buy-in and acceptance of the Division’s mission and goals by the President and Provost, and the belief of these key leaders that the retention model delineated within the proposal would work to accomplish good student performance and retention. Their confidence was bolstered by the successful track record of the unit submitting the proposal.

That unit, the Learning Skills Center, had at that point in 1997 a 25-year track record of reducing attrition among its service populations. First as the Counseling and Learning Department for Black Students, it saw the attrition rate plummet from over 50% to less than 1% within a six-year period. This accomplishment in retaining students of color led to the department’s expansion to serve all students and to the name change to the Learning Skills Center. The next documented success was the Center’s positive retention record in administering the University’s Act 101 Program which continues to serve academically and economically disadvantaged students. The pivotal issue was that this proposed Division was to enroll at that time students whose profiles were lower in SAT scores and grade point averages than those the unit was serving and the lowest that the University had ever admitted. It is of note that the unit’s Act 101 Program has the highest retention rate compared to all Act 101 Programs throughout the state of Pennsylvania.

Over a two-year period, the Provost on a regular basis invited the proposal’s author to the scheduled meetings of the deans to gain the acceptance of the leaders of the Schools to which Division students would transfer after their one or two years of development within the Division. In these planning sessions, the provost, the deans, and the Learning Skills Center’s director discussed the vision, reviewed all facets of the plan, planned implementation strategies, and anticipated problem areas—leading to a feeling of some ownership on the part of the deans in the emerging new academic endeavor. In 1996, the dean’s council voted in support of the creation of the Spiritan Division,
and in 1997 the Division enrolled its first cohort. Since that time the Division has enrolled 19 freshman classes.

This writer believes that the most significant change evolving from this gradual cultural shift was the expansion of the University’s view of its capacity and responsibility to serve a more diverse population. What also became evident is that the academic standing of a University can as well be judged by the transformative experiences provided students whose backgrounds—academic and, at times, socio-economic—suggest struggle, and by the results—a degree earned.

The Retention Model

The Robert and Patricia Gussin Spiritan Division is a full service department that enrolls each academic year a freshman cohort of students whose Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT) scores and/or high school grade point averages (GPA) are below their peers in the entering freshman classes at large. The Division proactively works to combat issues that interfere with academic performance and retention. Division students enroll in a common curriculum for their freshman year comprised primarily of the University’s core requirements. After successfully completing the Division’s curriculum and meeting the eligibility criteria of their chosen schools, students may choose to remain in the Division for a second year or transfer to their schools of choice.

Through a systematically executed tent of services, the Division implements its comprehensive retention model. The model’s core phases of readiness, accountability, and achievement—the RAA Model—are the three driving retention forces. While each is woven throughout the Division’s delivery system, there are services and programs specifically designed to address these forces. A description of the RAA model’s core system ensues.

Readiness Core Phase

The major readiness phase is the five-week, residential summer passage program which readies student, parent, teaching faculty, and Division staff of counselors, tutors, and administrators to participate in the Division’s cohort learning community of support involving all of them. This “get ready” phase begins before the start of the Summer Passage Program with students receiving along with their letter of acceptance an agreement signed by the Provost, the Director of Admissions, and the Director of the Division. Students are asked to review the agreement, which details the services the Division is responsible to provide and, by way of the student’s signature, the services in which the student commits to participate.
There are two additional pre-summer efforts to begin communication with families. One is families’ receiving a question and answer booklet that addresses questions about the Division and about the summer passage program. Community building is critical to the readiness phase, for it plays an invaluable role in helping students make a successful adjustment to the new environment of higher education. The Division is in fact the first academic unit at the University to establish learning communities through the cohort model. Research shows that students are more likely to leave college if they do not have a sense of belonging; community gives students a feeling of security and of fitting in that anchors them.

The other way in which the model begins to build community early and gets students and their families ready is with an open house, called a Preview Day, that affords families a chance to interact with students and parents of other newly admitted students and with current and former Division students—all with an eye toward establishing familiarity and comfort with the new surroundings.

The five-week residential Summer Passage Program readies students with the following system.

1. An orientation session for students and staff the day of move-in. How the Division works is explained thoroughly and small group sessions are led by staff to provide parents and students ample time to ask their questions.

2. Summer curriculum. Students enroll in four courses that total 6 credits and are part of the Division’s 24-credit curriculum that must be completed before students transfer to the Schools of their choice. This area helps students get ready for the Fall by their experiencing college level course rigor with some of the professors from whom they will also take courses in the Fall. Two of the four courses—the first of the three-credit freshman English course and a one-credit computer research course—are part of the University’s core curriculum. The other two one-credit courses, study skills and orientation to higher education, help students learn to employ essential learning strategies and help them to think through issues inherent in various social and academic situations students may encounter. While these two one-credit courses are not part of...
the University’s core curriculum, they nonetheless do count toward graduation; so no “throw-away” courses exist within the Division’s core curriculum. They are also the only course requirements within the Division’s curriculum that do not address the University’s core curriculum requirements.

3. **Evening Tutorials.** Tutoring labs are required for the English and computer research courses. Faculty coordinate lab assignments with tutors to ensure that needs observed in class are addressed in lab sessions.

4. **Test Battery.** Students’ skills and attitudes are assessed through a battery of tests and through their work in courses and in evening tutorial labs. The results form the basis of the individualized set of services prescribed for each student with tutoring as the centerpiece to aid students in course work during the academic year and in skill and knowledge development in preparation for taking a course.

5. **Activities.** Students, faculty, tutors, division and dorm staff and director attend events such as a play, baseball game, and an outdoor team building program to promote interaction and build community.

6. **Award Ceremony.** Parents, students, faculty and staff celebrate student achievement at the end of the summer passage with an awards program during which professors recognize students based upon performance, such as recognizing the most creative writer or the most improved student. A student is asked to share impressions of the experience, and a parent is also called upon to relate views about the program.

Concentration in the readiness phase of the Summer Passage Program is on helping students develop the attitudes, behaviors, skills, and work ethic that will bring them academic success and self-fulfillment. This phase is also the formation and the beginning of the functioning of students’ support teams.

**Accountability and Achievement Core Phases**

The accountability phase is one of the major areas of focus during the students’ freshman year. The Division begins
concentration on accountability and achievement during the summer through reinforcement of some of the essential elements such as students’ developing positive relationships with their teachers by attending class regularly and on time, and when they have to miss class, informing them and arranging make-up work; participating in class, demonstrating knowledge of the material; and completing assignments on time and well.

The accountability and achievement phases are two of the major areas’ focal points during the freshman year. During the Summer Passage Program, the Division begins to work to impress upon students the significance of these phases as discussed above. After having attended the Summer Passage Program, students will begin their first academic year having earned a quality point average and having completed six credits. This summer transitional period helps students to build confidence and a good academic record.

During students’ first year, the retention model’s other core phases of accountability and achievement work hand-in-hand and are in full swing. As members of a cohort, students enroll in a common curriculum their first year.

Accountability is reciprocal: both the student and the Division must deliver—the Division, its network of support, and the students their best efforts. The Division has developed many tentacles of service to assist students in working to reach their best efforts. Those tentacles of support are both proactive and strategic and are employed throughout the academic year to mutual benefit.

The major proactive accountability services include the following.

- daily monitoring of class attendance followed by calls and emails to those who missed;
- written progress reports per semester, three in number, from faculty, triggering follow through with those behind in work and/or failing;
- faculty meetings three times per semester to share insights about students in order to find ways to better assist them and to discuss teaching methods and other classroom techniques;
- implementation of individualized skill development plans through tutoring; and
- students’ weekly meetings with their advisor.
The primary strategic service is in the work of the intervention committee. This committee’s work is in part in reaction to the progress reports submitted by faculty. Students who are having difficulty in a course meet with the intervention committee to determine the source of difficulty and to develop strategy to address the problem. Depending upon the nature of the problems, and in compliance with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), parents are at times in attendance. The committee directs students to contact the professor to discuss ways to improve their status in the course. The written agreement reached between student and faculty is to be described in the Progress Agreement Form that students are to return to their advisor. The terms of the agreement become an item of ongoing discussion during students’ weekly meetings with their advisor.

In summary, the following are the categories of services and benefits through which the three core phases discussed above operate and are supported.

**BENEFITS AND SERVICES**

**Academic**

- Personalized advisement
- Tutorials: individual, small group, workshop, seminar
- Reading specialist
- Computer and writing labs
- Early registration
- Small classes
- Quality Point Average projection
- Service-learning opportunity
- Book discussion
- First year electronic portfolio (showcasing students’ work)
- Publication in student literary journal.

**Monitoring of student academic performance**

- Weekly meetings with academic advisors
- Attendance tracking
- Outreach to students with poor attendance
• Academic progress reports on all students through the Academic Intervention Program (AIP) pre-midterm and pre-final exams.

• Academic intervention committee meetings

• Three faculty meetings per semester

Counseling
• Individual

• Small group

• Personal adjustment

• Financial

• Career

Assessment
• Individualized prescribed services based on diagnostic testing

• Fall and Spring assessment and review

• Student assessment of faculty instruction

• Faculty assessment of Division services

• Division exit interview

Financial
• $1.5 million endowment established by Robert and Patricia Gussin

• $1.75 million endowment established by Robert and Patricia Gussin for a partnership between the Division and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Sarasota

• Two Robert and Patricia Gussin tuition scholarships

• 82% percent reduction in tuition rate during summer

Bridge program
• $500 Student of the Year award

• $1500 Michael P. Weber scholarship award

• $500 Dale Stephenson endowed book fund award

• $800 Norman and Rose Miller endowed book fund award

• Textbook assistance
• Tuition assistance
• Employment opportunities within the Division

Activities:
• Open house for prospective students and parent
• Parent-student orientation
• Summer cultural enrichment
• Summer award ceremony
• Formal reception to introduce freshman class

Overall, the primary goal of the Division is to help our students demonstrate their ability to compete academically with direct admit students by providing the following.

1. A required, signed student/Division agreement to allow these under-prepared students to take ownership of their academic and personal development.

2. Hand-selected instructors to ensure their commitment to the Division’s goal of student success.

3. A required five-week, six-credit summer semester—giving our students an early start over direct admits—including two college success courses—Introduction to University Success and Strategies for Academic Success—to support the student’s transition to college life and to its academic rigors.

4. Development of individual service prescriptions, including unlimited—recommended or required—course tutoring, based on test battery results and course success to demonstrate our commitment to each student.

5. Weekly meetings with an academic advisor and/or a counselor to allow early intervention in academic or personal issues.

6. Tracking of class attendance to ensure that our students are demonstrating commitment to academic excellence.

7. Early registration status to give our students advantage in course selections for next semester.

8. Core English I and II courses supplemented with lab sessions to reinforce research, writing, and grammar skills.

9. A weekly common-hour seminar to strengthen development of the student community, and real University courses—
rather than developmental or remedial—in the Division curriculum to underscore our students’ “belongingness” in the University community.

10. Two-year University retention with the option of staying in the Division for the sophomore year or transferring to the student’s University school of choice.

11. Pre-midterm and pre-finals progress reports requested of each student’s course instructors via the Division’s online Academic Intervention Program (AIP) leading to meetings with the Student Standing/Intervention Committee with those students who have D’s and/or F’s to address course performance, including attendance and tardiness, before failure becomes inevitable.

The Division exercises responsible stewardship over the funding the Division has received since its establishment. The Division was budgeted University funding from its inception; as noted above, in 2004, it was awarded a 1.5 million dollar endowment by Drs. Robert and Patricia Gussin who were impressed by the Division’s mission and track record. Endowment funds are used primarily to support students’ tuition and book needs. They are also used to pay faculty salaries and the salaries of current and former Division students who serve as resident assistants during the residential Summer Semester program and who serve as prominent role models for incoming freshmen.

The Philosophical Underpinning

The words of Langston Hughes so succinctly and aptly describe the importance of self-awareness and self-work that permeates much of the structure and time invested with students by the Division. Hughes writes in “Freedom’s Plow, 1943”:

When a man starts out with nothing,
When a man starts out with his hands
Empty, but clean,
When a man starts out to build a world,
He starts first with himself
And the faith that is in his heart-
The strength there,
The will there to build.

What we know to be true relative to the importance of teachers’ expectations of students and student outcomes is also true of students and their expectations of themselves. Those who consider themselves worthy human beings have faith in
themselves, and believe they are entitled to good things happening to them. What happens? The self-fulfilling prophecy takes hold. One receives, eventually, what one expects to receive. These high expectations begin to guide students’ actions and ultimately lead to favorable outcomes for the individual. Thus, interactions with students throughout all the fibers of the Division are trained on helping to build the self-worth of the person in various ways, resulting from the realization of the inextricable link that often exists between frame of mind, as shaped by our views and knowledge of ourselves, and our accomplishments.

Emanating from the belief that self-motivation comes from self-knowledge, the Division hopes to help lead and inspire students to think positively about themselves and to build self-esteem. The collective philosophical view of the Division is captured in Langston Hughes’ poetry that speaks of faith and the will. The will is the formidable human force, our center of control; the spirit is the kindling in the fireplace of the will. The important spirit is one’s storehouse of inspiration. Recognizing that human beings must work to keep the human spirit lifted, the Division’s work with its students seeks to provide experiences that enlighten, inspire, and bring about self-knowledge and growing self-worth and belief.

Service Learning

The inclusion of a service learning experience within the Division’s curriculum since its inception in 1997 gave recognition to the importance of gaining self-awareness and an increased sense of self through service to others. The service learning course, Field Experience, is taught over two semesters with the first semester being devoted to preparation and the second being given to the performance of the service, tutoring.

Service learning was and is seen as an expression of the Division’s philosophy of education that students are to be provided experiences that help them to develop civic responsibility. As Dewey and Jefferson espoused, this helps them to begin to serve in the role of the democratic public citizen, as individuals who ponder with other citizens the essence of the public good and ways to get there (Sehr 7). Further, service learning assists in maintaining the important linkages among citizenship, schooling, and democracy; for from the viewpoint of the political scientist, Benjamin Barber, democracy necessitates training and participation since students are not familiar with the world and need experiences that help them learn to become socially responsible citizens.
Such training for engagement with community partners parallels the mission and presence of the University’s founders, the Spiritan Congregation, as described in their own words.

All around the globe Spiritans often go where living conditions are most difficult. The people we choose to be with are often struggling to survive from one day to the next. They are suffering from injustice, downhearted and diminished in spirit, forgotten or abandoned by civil and government institutions. We work with whole communities giving relief to people who are poor, sick and hungry. In addition, we educate young men and women in the skills they will need to further our efforts to serve humanity. (The Spiritans: One Soul. One Spirit. Spiritans USA https://www.facebook.com/pages/Spiritans)

Pedagogically, service learning is seen as an approach that combines community service, an identified need, with specified academic outcomes and structured reflection. Service learning provides students the opportunity to learn and develop via in-the-real-world surroundings. Such experiences hold great potential for students to learn about themselves as well as about parts of their community surroundings to which they are exposed and might not have been without the service. A major distinction between the educational experiences that students have had and the focus of the type of instruction that they learn about and employ in their service learning course is in the andragogical nature of tutoring—the tutor and tutee are equal partners in the learning process. The tutor encourages tutee participation in planning—pace, information, etc. The development of this method and mindset is important in students’ as tutors’ quests to make tutees independent learners and to learn how the revelations about independent learners are applicable to them as college students.

In this course students also study social justice by doing some research, and by writing about and sharing what they have learned through presentations and discussions. Speakers addressing various social justice topics as well as assigned readings help to add to students’ developing knowledge base and their acquiring a deeper understanding of the Spiritan Congregation’s mission.

**Student Outcomes**

As discussed throughout, Division students are freshmen—and some sophomores—who are judged to be college material but who do not meet university “direct admit” standards for the year of their admissions application. Historically, between 2002 and 2014, these students on average have SAT scores 162 points
below the University norm and high school grade averages 0.88 points below the average of directly admitted students. Cohort 18 of the Division’s 2014-15 freshman class had an average high school QPA that was 1.15 points below the University’s entering freshman class and an average combined SAT score of 122 points below the freshman class at large.

The demographic breakdown of the Division over its 18-year history reveals 35% females and 65% males. Racial and ethnic diversity includes 71.5% white, 20.2% African-American, 3.2% Latino, 1.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan, 3.4% Other/Unknown.

The Division has served students who have performed poorly in other schools of the University, transferred to the Division to get on their feet academically, then transferred back to their schools and graduated. Some students who were admitted to one of the schools of the University attended the Division’s Summer Semester. Over the Division’s 19-year history, it has served 1,012 students including the freshman class of 2015. Some interesting facts are that since inception more than 90% of the students served have been retained for 4 years; the overall retention rate of the Division is 82% which compares well to the University’s 87% for the same period. The last 6-year graduation rate for the Division is 63.6%, the University 64% for the same period.

The Division’s four-year graduation rate from inception is 62.4%. This number is arrived at by looking at the graduation of true Division students, meaning those who were admitted to the Division, attended the Summer Semester, and matriculated as Division students their freshman year.

Students who were admitted to the University as Gussin Spiritan Division students have graduated from every school of the University in the following percentages: 48% College of Liberal Arts; 35% School of Business; 10% School of Education; 3% School of Nursing; 1% School of Pharmacy, Health Sciences, Music, Leadership; and 1 student from Natural and Environmental Sciences. These measures are a proud testimony to our ultimate goal—a degree. Duquesne serves God by serving students and empowering the weak.

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