



**Establishing and Sustaining a Connected
Living and Learning Community**

International FYE - Montreal

July 23, 2009

Al DeCiccio - Provost

Southern Vermont College



Southern Vermont College

SVC offers a comprehensive education grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and intended to be career-launching:

1. Nursing
2. Radiologic Technology
3. Criminal Justice/Enforcement
4. Business/Entrepreneurship
5. Psychology

SVC develops these essential skills, among many others:

1. Reading
2. Writing
3. Speaking
4. Reasoning
5. Information Technology

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An Experiment in Possibility

The New England Journal of Higher Education
Spring 2009

<http://www.nebhe.org/content/view/332/9/>

Creating a Retention Quilt - Southern Vermont College President **Karen Gross** and her colleagues **Albert DeCiccio** and **Anne Hopkins Gross** explain how the Bennington, VT, college uses tools ranging from discussion of Robert Frost to fireside chats to create a learning community and boost retention.

The Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education
July 2009

<http://jarhe.research.glam.ac.uk/vol1num2/>

Kairos: The Right Time for the Laboratory as an Educational Model – Albert DeCiccio argues that laboratory learning, both within and outside the classroom, provides a frame for the good work of higher education. If we act now and accept the concept of *kairos*, or the “right time,” we will do more than help our current students, we will be sustaining higher education for the future. We will be a laboratory experiment that works — for students, for faculty, for staff, and in the larger higher education community.

Laboratory Learning: An Experiment in Possibility

Build the Enterprise

Theory is fascinating. Experience is priceless. One of SVC's exciting new academic initiatives, *Build the Enterprise*, launched this spring. Students in this program develop a deep understanding of entrepreneurship through extensive opportunities to learn about existing businesses, while developing and running a business of their own.

Laboratory Learning: An Experiment in Possibility

Entrepreneurship Lab

The Entrepreneurship Lab provides learners with direct and sophisticated insight into the nature of current organizational problems. By observation and through participation in a dialogue with organizational managers, learners acquire direct experience in the accurate definition of organizational problems, in the identification and enfranchisement of stakeholders through education and training, in problem re-framing, in the introduction of strategic knowledge into the process, in the development of plausible strategies and solutions, and the articulation and testing, and evaluation of alternatives.

Laboratory Learning: An Experiment in Possibility

A Student's Response to SVC's *Build the Enterprise Lab*

<http://www.mybte.org/BTEmainwRSS.html>

“Professor Crowell is a wonderful professor and uses a new style of teaching, the kind where the student puts into practice a concept that becomes the reason for action. He uses a different approach: discussion, along with very relevant observations for the future of not only entrepreneurship but management and business concepts and methods. I have been more aware of what is going on in our economy, and on innovation for the future. It's not about long readings – no smoke and mirrors, no difficult tests – but raw, real-life meaningful discussions that spark up conversation in today's crazy world.”

--Stephen Nostrand, *Class of 2012*

Laboratory Learning: An Experiment in Possibility

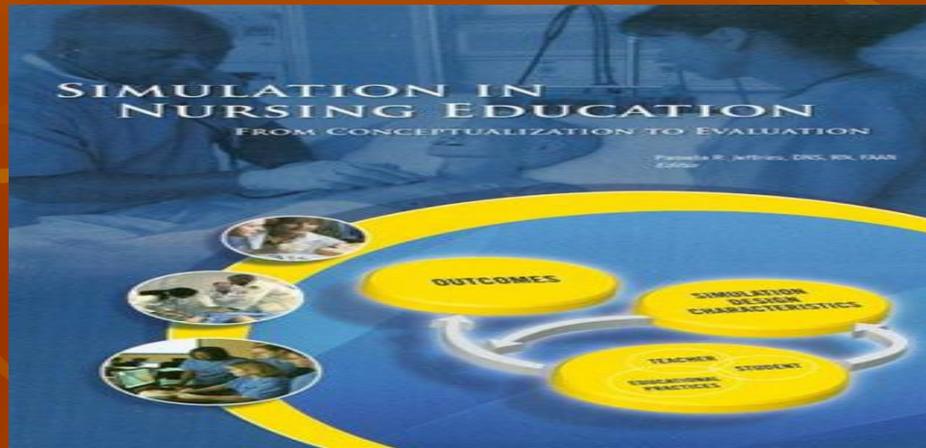
Healthcare Management and Advocacy

The Healthcare Management Advocacy Program is the newest prong of the College's Health Care offerings. This course of study will produce professionals who will help individuals, families, and organizations maneuver the healthcare system more effectively than they can do so currently. Preparation in the Healthcare Management Advocacy Program will enable students to work in varied settings: nursing homes, hospitals, doctors' offices, small clinics, insurance companies, businesses, pharmaceutical companies, and government offices.

Laboratory Learning: An Experiment in Possibility

Simulation Learning and a Simulation Laboratory will be a new feature at SVC.

<http://www.laerdal.com/nav/29948425/Patient-Simulators.html>



Retention Theoretical Underpinnings

The academic literature is clear: the early weeks on campus truly matter for students and affect their likelihood of progressing (Tinto 1988, 2006); Astin (1977, 1993); Kuh (2007, 2008). As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Kuh (2008) observe, many variables within the campus environment itself impact student retention: academic offerings, residential programming, and the overall culture of the institution. Stated most simply, new students need to feel a part of their new institution and need to connect to each other, to faculty, and to the campus community.

Retention Theoretical Underpinnings: Two Ideas

1. Connecting with students *before* they even arrived on campus.
2. Intentionally and overtly linking pre-Orientation initiatives with both Orientation itself and events planned for students during the first few weeks on campus.

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Pre-Arrival Engagement Early and Often

In mid-summer 2008, five SVC divisional chairpersons wrote personalized letters to their students about the fall schedule and proposed selected courses for students to consider.

Now, in addition to personal contact, SVC utilizes the following road map:

http://www.svc.edu/student/freshman_academic_handbook_undated_fall2009.pdf

Pre-Arrival Engagement Early and Often

The Provost and Director of the College's first year course wrote to students about an initiative that would begin at Orientation and continue through the first semester. New students were advised that, at Orientation, they would be presented with the book *A Restless Spirit: The Story of Robert Frost*, by Natalie Bober. A brief chapter was enclosed, referencing how apprehensive Frost was as a young man when asked to read his poetry to members of his new community and to present his ideas about teaching writing to his New Hampshire teaching community. The chapter disclosed how undertaking both tasks helped build confidence. The letter specifically acknowledged that many new SVC students might be anxious like Frost, perhaps even questioning whether they might meet the expectations or negotiate the circumstances they may face as first year college students. Students were asked to read the chapter, reflect upon Frost's experiences, and then write a one-page statement explaining their feelings as they prepared to transition from high school to college.

Student Response to Frost Chapter

One SVC New Student Response to Frost Chapter (excerpted):

It was the night before Orientation, and I was wide-awake, with my inhaler in one hand and a box of chocolate chip cookies in the other. I have to sleep, I thought, urging my eyelids to close and my breathing to slow. This isn't going to work, I thought again, and sat up, tossing the empty cookie box to the floor of my bedroom ... when I remembered the chapter we were asked to read on Robert Frost It reminded me that, as with Frost himself when he was asked to read "A Tuft of Flowers" or to present on his teaching methods, others would be just as nervous on the first day of Orientation as I was. And the realization struck me that this would be my path less traveled ... All of my other friends had gone to northern Vermont for college, and I had gone south. They went where they had friends and relatives, and I went where no one else dared. Suddenly I was proud of myself, set the chapter down, and smiled. I climbed back into my bed, snuggled in between the blankets, and slept without a single interruption of an Orientation nightmare ...

Parent Programming and Frost Follow-through

Forging a partnership with a small, local theater company, we commissioned the director (who was from Bennington and had recently experienced his own children leaving for college) to write six skits, in consultation with our Dean of Students. The company's professional actors performed the skits with some of SVC's student-leaders playing the parts of new students.

The skits were performed twice: once for parents and once for new students. They were brief and touched on some of the key issues that parents and new students were thinking about: roommate concerns, lack of parental supervision, academic success, being overwhelmed with the newness of college, helicopter parents.

Parent Programming and Frost Follow-through

The first day of Orientation concluded with a dinner and a new SVC tradition, entitled the “Bookends of Your Education.” At this event, each incoming student was presented a book (in this case the Frost book) that had been hand-signed by every faculty and staff member within the campus community—from the president to the person serving students breakfast—again connecting new students to faculty and staff. Each student was then personally welcomed into the community by the President, the Provost, and the Dean of Students: the new students’ names were read and each student received the book and a formal, printed program commemorating the Bookends ceremony.

Parent Programming and Frost Follow-through

In another Frost-related activity, students were grouped into their first-year course sections and shuttled to the Robert Frost Stone House and Museum in the Bennington suburb of Shaftsbury where Frost lived and wrote “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Each instructor was given a CD recording to play for the group, and its selections highlighted Frost reading some of his poetry and reflecting on education. A luncheon conversation about the readings and about the student reflection papers ensued.

Post-Orientation Six Weeks

A formal welcoming event, Convocation, was held in the College's courtyard during the first week of classes. Its highlight an address delivered by the Provost, entitled the "Aims of Education" –

http://www.svc.edu/academics/convocation_address_aims_of_education_deciccio_2008.pdf.

In that address, the Provost spoke of higher education as an entrée into an ongoing human conversation to which everyone at Southern Vermont College is invited to contribute. Students received a backpack and exchanged simple, even homemade, gifts with each other symbolic of a of give and take.

Post-Orientation Six Weeks

The theater company re-appeared during the second week of classes and new students were invited to attend a twilight reading of Wendy Wasserstein's play, *Third*, in the campus courtyard. The reading was led by the same director who assisted in the Orientation skits and several actors from his company. The play, about plagiarism and profiling, was introduced by Wendy Wasserstein's sister, Georgette, who lives in the area. The play was followed by a discussion among students, their faculty, and the actors and, one week later, a discussion by students and faculty in the classroom.

Post the First Six Weeks

The Provost led a class on Frost's poetry and his life in Massachusetts and New Hampshire in order to bring the Frost theme full circle. The conversation detailed how, through his life experiences and challenges, Frost changed from being self-oriented to being community-oriented (within the family, the professional community, and the civic community)—all evident in his poetry. It was our intent to juxtapose Frost's experiences with the experiences of the first-year students, underscoring changes they might have had since starting college and what those changes might mean for them and their families as they returned home for the holiday break.

Post the First Six Weeks

We had an active Case Management Team whose members focused on students who were struggling—academically and/or behaviorally—and strategized outreach. We introduced a new online course registration process, which compelled students to continue to meet with their respective advisors for course approval (thus maintaining the personal touch) and which allowed students to draft a schedule themselves online prior to meeting with their advisors. We also had an active Retention Committee (re-established the fall of 2007), that focused on quality-of-life issues. This fall, Retention Committee members recommended, among other strategies, a fireside chat series which enabled faculty, staff, and students to talk openly and informally about life at SVC. The series elicited several actions designed to enhance fall retention, including a formalized intramural sports program and regularized transportation to and from Bennington.

First Year Course: Quest for Success (QFS) & Collaboration with Henry Louis Gates

Quest for Success (QFS): QFS is the College's first-year seminar program, which emphasizes problem-posing teaching and service learning. See <http://www.svc.edu/academics/qfsfall09.pdf>.

Fall 2009: Provost Albert DeCiccio will teach a QFS section: Exploring Faces of Diversity: Building The "I am. . .and I am from. . ." Exhibition. This project will engage first-year students in the deep and dynamic exploration and understanding of their roots, learning-while they do so-about different ways of unearthing, viewing, and presenting their own lives, family histories and ancestries. By learning how to conduct this type of specialized research, students will mount an exhibit at the Bennington Museum focusing on who they are, where they are from, where they are now, and where they might be headed. This course is one of three connected with Dr. Henry Louis Gates's African American Lives initiative. See <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aalives/>.

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What the Data Show: The Trends are Evident

Number of students in the first-year cohort who left by end of fall semester

2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
14/69	13/101	14/92	4/131
20%	13%	15%	3%

Percent of students in the first-year cohort who registered for spring

2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
80%	86.1%	82.6%	91%

Percent of students in the first-year cohort who registered for next fall

2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
42%	58%	67%	72-76%

