EHANCING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Bismarck State College, like all community colleges, is tasked with educating a wide variety of students who may be traditional aged or older than average. They may live on campus in residence halls or commute to campus daily. They may attend classes online from their homes anywhere in the country. Their goals may be to complete a technical program and become employed as soon as possible, or they may plan to finish a portion of their studies at BSC and transfer to a baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

This variety of students increases both the need and the difficulty of defining the kind of experience students want at BSC, and the challenge of meeting their needs for a positive college experience. It is safe to say that a 19-year old living in a residence hall hopes for and expects a different experience than the single mother who works full-time while attending classes. Yet, both want and deserve to be able to say that, when they leave the college, they had a good experience as a student at BSC.

Numerous studies over many years have researched the effects of the college experience on students. These studies have provided much information about what students want and need at college, what experiences, services, and opportunities are most valuable, and what activities or interventions increase persistence and completion of programs and degrees. We know, for instance, that a primary reason for student success at college is student-faculty interaction and interaction with peers. According to Pascarella and Terenzini in How College Affects Students, Vol. 2: A Third Decade of Research, student perceptions that faculty care about them and are accessible to them help to promote retention and successful completion.

Living on campus, while it may not improve cognitive skills, does offer greater opportunities for the peer and faculty interaction that is important. Increasing student engagement in the classroom improves knowledge acquisition. Extracurricular activities have modest positive effects on persistence, and development of social self-concept.

Improving the student experience at college reduces attrition and leads to greater student satisfaction. By paying attention to the campus environment, we can help students stay in college to meet their academic goals at the same time that we enhance the student experience. A campus ecology perspective discussed by Pam Schuetz in the 2005 Community College Review 32.4, acknowledges the many interdependent relationships among community college students, the environment, and activities that support student growth and development.

Such things as the physical environment, including learning spaces, design, signage, and aesthetics all play a role in the student experience. The organizational structure needs to be developed in a way that reduces bureaucratic hurdles and confusion, and provides services that help students receive sound advice and avoid mistakes. Since community college students are so varied it is important to construct a
college environment that allows for all students to feel that the college is the right place offering the right experience for them.

**BACKGROUND**

For many years Bismarck State College functioned as a junior college (BJC) with the primary goal to provide general education and liberal education courses for students planning to transfer to other colleges and universities. Students tended to be traditional-aged and interested in activities typical of the institutions to which they would transfer. Relatively few technical programs were available.

With changes in higher education, the junior college model began to evolve. Many junior colleges morphed into comprehensive community colleges as was the case with BSC. From a college with a mostly homogeneous student population, we began to serve different types of students with varied goals and a multitude of different needs. More technical programs were developed, a strong focus on community education emerged, and Bismarck State College became a more complex institution. How students experience BSC now is much different than it was in the BJC years.

**NATIONAL TRENDS**

Students today tend to have high expectations for college. They want amenities in residence halls and a variety of dining options. They want and expect social activities, high quality instruction, and excellent facilities. All of these things come with a cost.

The high cost of higher education is a nationwide concern, for college officials, parents, and students. Educational costs can prevent some students from enrolling in college and having any college experience at all. Building up debt often means students must work long hours or be constantly anxious about how they will pay back college loans. The high cost of college does not engender a positive college experience.

Students come to community colleges with a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, confidence, and levels of awareness of campus processes and procedures. Enrolling and retaining this diverse student clientele is difficult. Many colleges are looking at ways to eliminate confusing and time-consuming processes for students by developing one-stop services. One-stop shops where students can get help and questions answered without being routed all over campus are gaining in popularity. Admissions, records, advising, testing, financial aid, and other services are accessible in one place. Often the student will work with one person, a generalist who is able to assist students with a wide variety of needs. Such service concepts can do much to enhance the way students experience college.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Bismarck State College conducts two surveys that shed light on students’ perspectives of many aspects of college life including those of importance to the strategic theme of enhancing the student experience. The goal of the Student Satisfaction Inventory is to determine the degree of satisfaction students have with various services and opportunities at BSC.
The most recent Student Satisfaction Inventory conducted in 2010 identified the following statements as strengths of the college:

1) Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their fields
2) I am able to experience intellectual growth here
3) Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.

Among the weaknesses noted by students were:

1) Concerns about quality of instruction
2) Failure to provide timely feedback about student progress in a course
3) The quality of academic advising.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is intended to show the degree to which students are engaged in college. Specific questions address five benchmarks important to students’ college experiences. The two benchmarks particularly applicable to student experience are Student-Faculty Interaction and Support for Learners. Educators know that student contact with faculty helps students learn and persist in achieving their goals. We also know that students perform better and are more satisfied in college when there are strong support services and opportunities to develop positive relationships.

The 2011 CCSSE findings show that, at BSC, the Student-Faculty Interactions overall score is 48.4 which is below the mean of 50 and well below top-performing colleges at 58.1. The Support for Learners benchmark at BSC is 46.7, again below the mean of 50 and about 12 points below the score for top-performing colleges.

**WHAT WE LEARNED FROM DATA-GATHERING**

As we reviewed the data gathered from the various planning sessions and surveys, some main themes began to emerge: student perception of BSC, student/faculty/peer relationships, campus environment, and support and services. Students were outspoken about their needs which ranged from being quite simple (have a Red Box video rental on campus) to the very difficult (become a 4-year college).

**STUDENT PERCEPTION OF BSC**

The way prospective and current students view Bismarck State College has an effect on the experience those students will have here. The majority of student participants in the strategic planning process indicated that BSC is a good college where they can get a quality education at an affordable cost. Most express satisfaction with their instructors. However, there still is some feeling that BSC is just a slightly more difficult high school or that it is a place to go when you don’t know what else to do. Students who feel a community college is an inferior college are not apt to have a very positive experience. At the very least, it will be harder and take longer to get past their initial perceptions and develop a more positive attitude toward the college. As an institution, we need to consider the ways that we can change the negative perceptions.
STUDENT/FACULTY/PEER RELATIONSHIPS
As noted earlier, key to the college experience for students is the development of positive relationships with faculty and peers. Because so many of BSC’s students are commuters, older than average (32%), or part-time students (40%), they may lack the opportunities to develop many relationships with other students. For those students and, for most students, the classroom is where they experience college. Being able to connect with caring faculty members and classmates is going to produce the most lasting memories of a student’s experience at BSC.

Students appreciate the small classes at Bismarck State College that allow them more direct connection with faculty and other students. This single factor may be the most frequently mentioned by students regarding their experience at BSC.

In the data gathering phase students remarked that the use of eCompanion is a good way to keep connected with faculty and other students in a class. eCompanion also offers a mechanism for students to monitor their academic progress. Students want to be informed early if they are not doing well in a class. Many students come to BSC from a high school environment where they and their parents had ready access to information and grades. College students expect the same capability.

Meeting regularly with an academic advisor is another important way for students to stay connected while, at the same time, get advice about their classes and programs. Students planning to transfer, in particular, noted weaknesses in their advisor’s knowledge.

CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT
The campus environment includes such things as the appearance, as well as the maintenance of campus buildings and grounds. It also includes such things as the amenities and activities that make being on campus an enjoyable and pleasant experience. BSC’s campus environment is certainly different from that of more traditional colleges and universities.

Three hundred students live in residence on the campus. However, in the fall semester of 2011 there were 2538 students from Burleigh and Morton counties attending BSC, with 2316 students from the cities of Bismarck and Mandan. Of the 2316 Bismarck and Mandan students, 1104 are between the ages of 18-22.

Primarily on-campus students and local traditional aged students want a campus that provides interesting and fun activities that allow for socialization with their peers. BSC currently has many student clubs and organizations in which students can participate. Athletics, music, theater, intramural sports, and other activities are available. Special events, such as Fall Fantasy week, Welcome Week, Grad Fest, Campus Communication Fair, and Arts Quest offer many different activities, foods, games, and performances for students to enjoy. With the addition of the Aquatic and Wellness Center on campus, students have greater opportunities for physical activities.
Even though there is quite a lot of activity on campus, students were vocal about wanting more athletic events particularly, as well as more social events. Some students also mentioned a desire for different food/dining options.

**SUPPORT AND SERVICES**

Many students enter BSC with the intention of acquiring a bachelor’s degree. For those who wish to transfer to other institutions, the smooth transfer of their courses is a very important issue. Numerous times students mentioned the need for good academic advising to ensure that the courses they take will be accepted by a receiving institution.

Many students are not able to transfer to a college out of the community and need access to baccalaureate degree programs locally. It was frequently mentioned that Bismarck State College should be a four year college. If that is not possible students want access to baccalaureate degrees either through the development of bachelor’s programs by BSC or offered locally through collaborative partners.

Other needs expressed by students are for more housing, particularly on-campus. The cost of education is also a concern. Things that can be done to help financially, such as scholarships and grants, are important.

**CONCLUSION**

The student experience in college is all about the here and now. While students are planning for a future, whether at another college or on the job, the experience of being a student happens in the present. One student, responding to the online survey, stated that we need to “explain what happens at BSC – not just ‘Beyond’ BSC.” This discerning statement sums up the need for students to have a positive experience while they are in college. College should be more than just a way station on the road to something better. It should be a valuable experience in and of itself, something that students will remember as an enriching part of their lives. Not everything is about tomorrow for students. They want to engage in college and enjoy the experience today.

Several focus areas emerged that can help us find ways to enhance the student experience at BSC:

- Be more intentional in constructing and managing the student experience in college
- Ensure that the classroom is central in creating a positive experience for students
- Develop plans that will improve interaction between students and faculty
- Provide prompt feedback to keep students on track to completion
- Improve academic advising, particularly for transfer students
- Provide richer and more varied campus activities to promote a college atmosphere that traditional students crave and will increase peer interaction
- Communicate effectively about BSC to improve student perception about the college
- Build a sense of school spirit and pride.