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The revised 'Common Time' program as a strategy for student engagement and retention at university. A Practice Report

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Abstract

The School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University (Brisbane, Australia) developed the Common Time program in 2002 for its first year undergraduate students to increase student success in academic learning and to facilitate student engagement with staff and fellow students. Common Time consists of a series of facilitated forums during the initial weeks of each semester, where the first year cohort meet weekly to discuss general first year issues and receive information relevant to the first year university experience. As the program underwent changes in 2013, this paper discusses the findings of an evaluative research initiative. The results indicate that the revised 2013 Common Time program was, for the most part, effective in orientating and engaging these first year students during their transition into university study. However, further revisions to the program are needed to improve students' opportunities to build meaningful social networks in particular.

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Introduction

A substantial body of literature focusing on the most effective ways of improving retention rates and the engagement of first year students in higher education now exists. This expanding research field has emerged largely in response to increasing participation in tertiary study in Australia and internationally over the last few decades (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Nelson, 2014; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012). Within the current Australian context, first year students come from diverse cultural backgrounds with a significant population comprising individuals who are first in their families to enter higher education (Luzecy, King, Scutter, & Brinkworth, 2011; Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, & King, 2015; O'Shea, 2015a, 2015b). Such students often lack prior knowledge of academic processes, or access to academic or personal support from within their own social networks, placing them at higher risk of failure and attrition from university (Luzecy et al., 2011; Meuleman et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2015a, 2015b; Tinto, 2011).

Attrition has clear adverse social and economic impacts upon students (see Griffith University [GU], 2012; Kift et al., 2010; Tower, Walker, Wilson, Watson, & Tronoff, 2015). Ongoing cuts to funding (along with a widening participation agenda) for higher education, and government funding models that reward retention over time emphasise the importance of this issue for academic institutions (Australian Government, 2011; GU, 2012). The combination of these factors has produced a current climate where universities have a higher number of students who require intensive support to succeed, paired with increasing pressure on institutions to retain such students, often with fewer resources to do so (Hinton, Herring, Garrison, & Marshall, 2013). Unfamiliarity with institutional culture and the demands of an academic environment can result in higher attrition rates (Whitehead, 2012). Importantly, agreement

amongst key stakeholders that a diverse range of strategies is required to support commencing students as they transition into higher education (Fergy, Marks-Marana, Oomsa, Shapcotta, & Burke, 2011; Lenette, 2014) has contributed to the complex decision making required by institutions in relation to allocation of resources and programs for support (Hughes & Smail, 2015). If academic standards are to be maintained in this climate, a cogent argument exists for implementing viable, evidence-based strategies that provide the necessary academic and personal support to engage and equip first year students with the skills required to achieve success in a university setting. On the basis of the established body of literature regarding determinants of student attrition and interventions, seven key elements have informed an institution-wide evidence-based retention strategy at GU (see GU, 2012).

The Common Time Program

In 2002, the School of Human Services and Social Work (HSV) at GU translated the seven evidence-based retention elements into a clear and purposeful strategy by developing the Common Time Program [CTP] for its first year undergraduate students. The CTP, an award-winning program, aimed to: (a) enhance the student life cycle and increase student success in academic learning, and (b) facilitate student engagement with staff and fellow students. The program has evolved over time, most notably in late 2012 and early 2013 (see below).

Revised HSV Common Time program

The CTP consists of a series of facilitated forums during the initial weeks of each semester, where the first year cohort meets weekly to discuss general first year issues and receive information relevant to their university experience. Prior to 2013, the CTP was designed to include a mixture of (Larmar, 2007):

1. Structured academic and professional sessions (facilitated by specialist University staff, such as Learning Support Staff or the Faculty Librarian):
 - Academic sessions focused on improving students' abilities in areas such as essay writing, oral presentations, exam preparation, and research skills.
 - Professional sessions delivered by guest speakers from the Human Service field, centred on students' development and emerging practitioner identity.
2. Informal (supportive) sessions (facilitated by the HSV First Year Advisors in conjunction with first year course convenors):
 - Informal sessions provided students an opportunity to establish peer networks and consult with teaching staff in an informal, supportive setting.

The success of the CTP is highlighted by the high attendance rates in this voluntary program and the program's longevity (now in its fourteenth year).

A significant setback during the 2012/13 transition period impacted upon the CTP. As a 'course' worth 0 Credit Points (CP), an institution-wide decision that 0 CP courses should not be timetabled meant that it was not possible to implement the CTP effectively for 2013 alongside first year courses. Following lobbying for its reinstatement, the CTP was scheduled on time for Semester 1 2013 but was facilitated in a more structured manner, in contrast to previous years. The focus of the CTP centred on academic skills workshops, giving less focus and priority to the facilitation of informal interactions. Given that the engagement and retention of first year students is (and is likely to remain) a significant issue in higher education, the present study aimed to

evaluate the efficacy of the revised HSV CTP in supporting students during their transition to university.

Method

An anonymous paper-based survey developed by the fourth author in 2006 was used to elicit data associated with the CTP in Semester 1 2013 (for a full report of the 2006 evaluation study findings, see Larmar & Ingamells, 2010). Given that the survey is a 24-item measure utilising a 5-point likert scale to record individual perceptions associated with the CTP, it was deemed the most appropriate instrument to address the research aim. The survey is organised into six domains that measure: (1) perceptions of Common Time; (2) acquisition of transition information; (3) staff interactions with students; (4) student experiences of university culture and belonging; (5) perceived expectations of university engagement; and (6) academic skills.

First year students enrolled in a HSV undergraduate program at Logan and Gold Coast campuses, who attended the CTP in week six, were invited to participate in the investigation. Potential participants (N=119) were enrolled in one of three undergraduate programs offered within HSV, namely: (a) the Bachelor of Human Services ($n=41$); (b) the Bachelor of Social Work ($n=44$); and (c) the Bachelor of Child and Family Studies ($n=34$). The potential sample population comprised 21 males and 98 females. There was considerable cultural diversity in the group, with a large number of international students primarily from Asian and African countries. However, records indicate that most students identified as Australian ($n=91$) and/or spoke English as their first language ($n=90$). The mean age of the potential sample group was 27.16 years. The total number of students who participated in this study was 56 (47%).

The survey was administered at the end of the week six session by a non-teaching staff member. Given the nature of the paper-based survey, only students who attended the week six CTP were invited to participate. Students were surveyed at this point in the semester to maximise participation. They were assured that participation was voluntary and that results would remain anonymous. This research therefore conformed to standard research ethical practices required by GU's Human Research Ethics Committee. Students were given a 30-minute period to complete the survey. Completed responses were deposited into a sealed envelope to assure anonymity. No inducements to participate were offered. Responses to each survey item were scored as follows: strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); sometimes (3); agree (4); and strongly agree (5).

Results

Almost half (48%) of the participants attended all six Common Time sessions, and no participants indicated they 'rarely' or 'never' attended the CTP. Respondents identified 13 components of the revised 2013 CTP they perceived helpful or useful (e.g., score reflected a definitive 'agree' or 'strongly agree' response; that is, a mean score of 4.0 or above). Components included (a) availability of relevant information (i.e., related to coursework, key staff, university services, university and staff expectations of students, and career pathways); (b) staff responsiveness (i.e., staff commitment to supporting students, staff clarifying student understanding of staff/university expectations, positive interactions with staff, student freedom to articulate opinions or concerns); and (c) structured learning (i.e., well organised and

Table 1: Common Time components participants considered most helpful or useful

	Common Time Component	Mean score*
1.	Through my experience of Common Time I was introduced to a range of services offered by the university (e.g. computing and technology services, library services etc.).	4.4
2.	During Common Time staff seemed to be committed in their support for students.	4.4
3.	Common Time experiences developed my awareness of key staff associated with my degree program.	4.3
4.	Overall, the interaction with staff during Common Time was positive.	4.3
5.	During Common Time expectations of teaching staff regarding my academic responsibilities in my degree program were made clear.	4.2
6.	Common Time provided an opportunity where students could express their opinions or concerns to staff in a supportive environment.	4.2
7.	Common Time staff actively checked that students understood staff/university expectations.	4.2
8.	Common Time provided a forum for staff to outline their expectations of students	4.2
9.	During the first six weeks of Common Time the information I received about my degree program was sufficient.	4.1
10.	Common Time provided a forum for students to establish a clear understanding of their study pathway relating to their degree program.	4.0
11.	Overall, the Common Time sessions were well organised and provided a structure conducive to my learning needs.	4.0
12.	I have found the first six weeks of the Common Time program has stimulated my thinking and enhanced my learning.	4.0
13.	Common Time has assisted in alleviating some of the initial concerns I held about my first semester of study at University.	4.0

*Note. Score range = 1-5.

structured sessions that stimulated students' thinking and enhanced learning). Table 1 presents the components of CTP participants considered most helpful or useful, and their corresponding mean score.

There were however, several elements of the revised CTP that participants perceived were only moderately achieved (e.g., mean score reflected a 'sometimes' response; that is, a score between 3.0 and 3.9). These elements reflected (a) relevance of activities, and (b) social networks and social integration, and included:

1. *Common Time assisted students in helping them to build meaningful networks with other students in their program of study (m=3.5);*
2. *Common Time assisted students in giving them a clearer sense of why they are attending university (m=3.7);*
3. *Common Time provided an opportunity for students to interact with other students in their degree program (m=3.8);*
4. *Common Time assisted students in helping them to feel a part of the University culture (m=3.8);*
5. *Common Time provided opportunity for students to interact with staff in their degree program (m=3.9);*
6. *The activities during the first six weeks of Common Time prepared students well for their first semester of study (m=3.9); and*
7. *Common Time has assisted in giving me greater confidence in achieving better results in the first semester of my program of study (m=3.9).*

Despite lower scorings on these seven items, the majority of respondents considered the CTP to be a valuable resource ($n=46$; 82%) and indicated that the program was worthy of recommendation to the following year's

commencing students ($m=52$; 93%). Importantly, most participants ($n=50$; 89%) stated they were happy with the CTP as a means of assisting transition into university. Overall, the results indicate that the revised 2013 CTP was, for the most part, effective in orientating and engaging first year HSV undergraduate students in their transition into university study. Appendix A provides a more detailed summary of the results to each survey question.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the revised HSV CTP in supporting students in their transition to university in Semester 1 2013. Given that the program changes reflected a more structured, academic focus, it was anticipated that participants would view the program as useful in providing relevant information to first year students and less useful in facilitating meaningful social interactions. The findings indeed supported this proposition. There are several implications to this finding, given that the benefits of peer support and new social networks in undergraduate programs are now well established in research on first year students in higher education (Hughes & Smail, 2015; Pym & Kapp, 2013). These implications (discussed below) reflect principles of practice that would likely transfer into other contexts; however further research is needed to support these claims.

Transferable principles of practice

First, in addition to structured, informative sessions, the design of first year university programs would benefit from *purposefully* including opportunities for students to meaningfully interact with other students as well as teaching staff. The findings suggest that students meeting together on a weekly basis in a more formal, structured manner does not necessarily result in the development of meaningful social networks, social integration,

and/or a sense of belonging at university. This finding is significant given that previous research suggests that the development of meaningful social networks with staff and other students, social integration, and a sense of belonging at university are influential in determining academic success (Pym & Kapp, 2013).

Second, finding an appropriate *balance* between structured, informative sessions and informal sessions that provide opportunities for first year students to build meaningful networks and consult with teaching staff appears to be a critical consideration in engaging students and equipping them with the skills required to achieve at university. As suggested by Tinto's (1975, 1993) College Student Departure Theory, universities are composed of two systems – a social system and academic system – and students' integration into both systems subsequently enhance their likelihood of succeeding at university. Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory posits that students who do not adequately integrate into the university's social system are more likely to voluntarily leave university than those who socially integrate. Likewise, students who insufficiently integrated into the university's academic system are also more likely to drop out, either voluntarily or through forced dismissal, due to poor academic performance (Tinto 1975, 1993). Tinto (1975) therefore argues that:

A person may be able to achieve integration in one area without doing so in the other. ... One would expect a reciprocal functional relationship between the two modes of integration such that excessive emphasis on integration in one domain would, at some point, detract from one's integration into the other domain. (p. 92)

Although Tinto's (1975, 1993) work has been criticised for neglecting considerations of cultural differences (Tierney, 1992) as well as differences between different types of higher education institutions (Braxton, Sullivan, &

Johnson, 1997), several recent studies nevertheless support Tinto's (1975, 1993) findings (Ishitani, 2016; Yang & Brown, 2013). Thus, participants in this study would have likely benefited from a balanced formal/informal program as per the structure of the CTP prior to 2013.

Finally, the findings suggest that, despite some limitations in the 2013 CTP design, it was a valuable resource for students. Specifically, the timetabled nature of the CTP as a course worth 0 CP (to run alongside four 40 CP first year courses) provides first year undergraduate students consistent access to a program focussed solely on engaging and equipping them with the necessary skills to achieve both socially and academically at university. The benefits of timetabling such a program, rather than attempting to assimilate useful first year information and opportunities for social engagement into the four 40 CP courses, include: (a) a reduction of information overlap across different courses; (b) minimised risk of missing key information (due to lecture and tutorial time pressures, course information overload, or lack of knowledgeable teaching personnel); (c) minimised miscommunication of important information across courses; and (c) increased opportunities for students to meaningfully interact with other students and with teaching staff (if facilitated successfully). The CTP is therefore a cogent strategy to assist first year undergraduate students in their transition into university, improve student retention, and reduce attrition rates. However, further revisions to the 2013 CTP (i.e., *purposefully* including opportunities for students to meaningfully interact with peers and teaching staff) are needed to improve students' opportunities to build meaningful social networks.

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