

Return to Learn

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Assisting nontraditional students with the transition into the post-secondary environment can be a rewarding challenge. At a 4-year, public institution in the western United States, a federally funded government program has designed a seminar to promote a healthy transition and ease the anxiety associated with entering college. This seminar is titled *Return to Learn*, and our organization has hosted this workshop for about 20 years. The seminar is 2 days long, from 8 a.m. - 4 p.m., and is usually held the week prior to the start date of classes. Arrangements have been made with the host institution to offer the course free to any student interested in attending, or for one credit as a pass/withdraw Arts and Science course. After completing the seminar, students often write on the evaluation that the seminar was not long enough, that they would have liked to have stayed and learned more, that their anxieties were reduced, that they feel prepared to conquer their first semester, that they learned about resources and where to go for help, and that they are thankful such a seminar exists.

Planning the *Return to Learn* seminar takes advance preparation and arrangements. The seminar can be adjusted, and should be, to meet the needs of the student population. The main purpose of the seminar is to introduce students to items, procedures, and jargon they will encounter at the institution, as well as to acquaint students with support offices on campus, such as the academic support center, health services, disability support services, and multicultural support services; and with the variety of essential offices on campus, such as the advising center and financial aid office.

Many decisions need to be made when choosing to offer this type of seminar: What information do students need? Do we need to prepare a syllabus or handouts? Who will be speaking? How do we put students at ease? What are the questions students need the answers to but don't know they need to ask? How can we help students connect to the campus to increase the likelihood of retention and, ultimately, graduation?

The first thing to do is meet with the integral student affairs departments. In order for the seminar to be successful, a team effort is needed with the student at the center of the plan. Keep in mind that the agenda will constantly change and evolve to reflect the changing needs of students. Our program uses a checklist to make sure all areas have been addressed. Logistics include taking the appropriate steps to have *Return to Learn* added to the institution's course listings, reserving rooms and equipment, contacting and securing speakers, obtaining presentation materials, determining when and how to promote *Return to Learn*, and ensuring staff and student assistance in producing the seminar.

Students learn about *Return to Learn* through newspaper advertisements, postings at campus offices and community agencies, referrals from community service organizations, and through mailings sent to prospective students enrolling at the

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university. Most of the information on *Return to Learn* is vague; that is intentional. In order to monitor interest and those intending to attend, we give just a little information and then a phone number to call for more details. This allows us to confirm that the student understands that the seminar is two days, to give directions, and to answer any questions the student might have. We then send the student detailed information about *Return to Learn*.

At our seminar we are able to utilize a peer mentor program on campus. The mentors assist the staff with *Return to Learn* by staffing sign-in tables, answering questions, leading small group discussions, giving campus tours, presenting breakout session topics, and “mingling” with students to help them feel more comfortable. We have found that the presence of experienced students greatly reduces the anxiety of the new(er) students.

Return to Learn kicks off the seminar by offering breakfast snacks and beverages. Students then sign in at the registration table, fill out a name tag, and receive a folder and a student handbook. All students are kept together and seated in one room. A PowerPoint presentation entertains the early arrivals. Campus facts and photos are interspersed with jokes and riddles to indicate that the seminar is fun and low stress. At this time we welcome the students to *Return to Learn* and conduct a mini-orientation with the staff from campus offices, such as Disability Support Services, the Advising Center, Health Services, Multicultural Support Services, Campus Ministry, Financial Aid, and Career Services. Each of these speakers gives a brief overview of the services his or her office provides, states the location, and passes out brochures and/or business cards. After the introductions, we administer a scantron pretest. The purpose of this exercise is to acquaint students with using a scantron and introduce the type of tests they may encounter.

After the pretest, we break into small groups that then go to separate rooms with a mentor for small group discussions. Not all students are comfortable in a large group or with talking in front of other people. This exercise allows students the opportunity to connect at a more personal level and to network with other students. After the group sharing, we give students a quick break before a spell of reality. The presentation on transitions is an enlightening, realistic speech on the changes college will have not only on the student, but on those around them too. This discussion covers change, balance, goals, and finding your “niche.” The students are on their own for lunch, and then we come back for the afternoon session.

During the afternoon of the first day, we have breakout sessions. The number of students attending *Return to Learn* determines the number of breakout sessions we offer, and the type of topics also determine the length of the sessions. We have found that fall enrollment is at least twice as high as spring enrollment; therefore, we need more sessions to accommodate the number of students attending. We have also found that in order to cover topics well and allow time for questions, we need about 45 minutes for each session. Breakout sessions on Day One are usually topics that are covered by campus personnel, such as financial aid, online classes, and connecting to campus. At the end of the afternoon, we come back together as one big group for the assignment. The assignment is only required for students who are taking *Return to Learn* for credit; it is

a series of questions that the student answers in a blue examination book. This exposes students to another item and procedure they will come in contact with during their college career. Students may stay and work on the assignment or take it home and finish it. The assignment is due in the morning on the second day, thereby allowing the assignment to be “graded” for feedback and returned to the student by the end of the seminar.

Day Two of *Return to Learn* starts the same as Day One—snacks and beverages, along with signing in and name tags. One big difference is that as students are signing in, each one is given an answer to one question on the pre/posttest. The idea is that after the first day and the small group and breakout sessions, the students have had some experience networking and socializing. They can now put that skill to use for academic purposes. If the students talk and interact they can learn all of the “answers” for the posttest, and that is the catch—they have to talk and interact. This also helps students meet each other and form connections. Then when they start their classes the next week, they may see someone they met at *Return to Learn* and reduce the feelings of isolation and anxiety.

The next discussion gives students some basic pointers in study skills and tips to do well in school, such as sit near the front, introduce yourself to the professor, notify your instructors if you can’t make it to class, take notes, and make a friend in each class for back up. Students are then exposed to a sample lecture from one of the faculty members. During this time the mentors model the appropriate behavior and take notes. Afterwards the notes are placed on a table for the students to review. This demonstrates the variety of styles of note taking and reinforces the concept that there is no one “right” way to take notes; they should find the style that works for them. After a quick break, a motivational panel speaks to the *Return to Learn* class. This is a group of four to five students who have overcome great challenges or obstacles to achieve academic success. Panelists share their stories, as well as what has worked for them to become successful. Next, the *Return to Learn* class is divided into two halves. One half of the class goes to tour the library and the other half goes to tour the Academic Support Center, and then they switch.

After lunch on Day Two, we again have breakout sessions. These sessions are conducted by the mentors and the *Return to Learn* project staff. Sessions on Day Two typically cover study skills, note taking, and time management. After the breakout sessions, the students come back together as one group, and we administer the posttest and the evaluations of the *Return to Learn* seminar. The seminar concludes with mentors providing individual campus tours to students.

Return to Learn focuses on orientation and the transition process for students. Many of the students we encounter are nontraditional and have elevated levels of anxiety about returning to college. *Return to Learn* has been a proven and successful tool for easing students’ transition, orienting students to the college culture, and assisting in retention. Because *Return to Learn* is specifically designed to meet the needs of students and the project staff is willing to reflect and evolve, a connection, rapport, and support system is

established with students that extends beyond the two days of the seminar and well into the student's academic career.