

The Vermont Connection

Volume 25 *Beyond the Ivy Walls: Mapping the Modern University*

Article 9

January 2004

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Recommended Citation

Kemp-DeLisser, Khristian (2004) "Bursting the Bubble: How Time-Off Student Reintegrate into the College Campus Community," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 25 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol25/iss1/9>

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Bursting the Bubble: How Time-off Students Reintegrate Into the College Campus Community

Khristian Kemp-DeLisser¹

Every year the incoming student body includes those returning from time-off, or a leave of absence, lasting from semesters to years. How did their time away from the classroom affect their return? How will this time away affect the rest of their college career? What were the causes of their time-off? How did they decide when to return? What immediate issues did they face upon their return? The author will explore the experience of returning students, suggesting tips for student affairs professionals to help students incorporate their experience away from school into their learning and development in college.

The ultimate test of the worth of your time-off may well be your ability to integrate the new things that you learned.
- Colin Hall & Ron Lieber, *Taking Time-Off* (1996).

Students who take voluntary leave of absences or “time-off” from school have a shared experience and point of view that deserves consideration by higher education professionals. This article contains five profiles of time-off students: Simon, Quianna, Nick, Leah, and Ben. Challenges unique to each student emerge through their profiles, along with patterns, trends, and unifying themes that can assist student affairs professionals in approaching such students. Theoretical frameworks, previous literatures, and profiles created from student interviews are used to explore the experience and the needs of students who take one or two semesters off.

Methodology

Qualitative data summarized in this article was gathered by interviewing former students who took time-off during their college career. The participants were identified through the author’s personal contacts. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone. In all cases, a profile of the student was created using written notes and tape recordings. Please refer to the appendix for a copy of the interview questions. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Findings

Adult Learners

Simon’s Story

Simon’s story illustrates the similarities between time-off students and adult learners. Simon’s first experience with college was in 1984 when he enrolled in a small commuter school in Cupertino, California. He simultaneously started his own house cleaning business. He said he was miserable in college but his business was very successful. In less than a month, he withdrew from classes to focus on his business.

More than ten years later, he decided to go back to school. He said all of his friends told him college was the best experience of their lives. One day, while visiting a friend in New England, he fell in love with the city and scenery. When he discovered that he could go to college at a mid-sized state institution close by, he decided to enroll.

This time, he was determined to have “the college experience,” which he described as building relationships with other students, partying, and having fun. That meant he had to live in a residence hall. He said he had to intentionally create a community for himself. He threw parties and dinners regularly. His room became a focal point in the residence hall community. His second year, he became a Resident Assistant (RA).

Despite the friendships he made, he said he still felt distance from the other students. He felt like an outsider because of his age and maturity. He was surprised at how the other college students felt disempowered. They did not know how to take initiative to plan an event or approach a professor about class. He said the typical student did not live up to their potential: “They were like pods that didn’t care and did whatever they had [to do] to get by.”

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Simon spoke with contempt about the culture of the academy. Everything in college is a one way street, he said. The faculty and staff are narrow-minded. They do not encourage “thinking out of the box.” Credentials and scholarship are valued more than experience.

Since Simon is older than the other time-off students interviewed for this article, his experience is echoed in much of the existing literature on students who “stop out.” The literature is dominated by information about “adult learners,” or “reentry students,” who are defined as older than 25 or who have been away from college for more than five years (Ely, 1997). The literature ignores the traditional-aged student who stops out for one or two semesters.

Pardee (1992) studied the “influences present when ‘stop out’ students reenroll in community college credit coursework” (p. 3). He used questionnaires and tests to develop a profile of 396 students who had dropped out and then returned to community college. Most of Pardee’s students, like three of the students profiled for this article, “were returning to the college they left” (p. 3). He found his students placed an “increased value on education” when they reenrolled in school. All of the students interviewed for this article also expressed an increased value of education. Another characteristic that the time-off students shared with adult learners was that they are “more focused and less obsessed with competing” than traditional students (Tiff, 1988, p. 1).

Study Abroad Students

Time-off students also share a similar point of view with students who study abroad. Acknowledging this fact, some colleges refer to time-off students as “domestic study students.” Students who study abroad experience a “reverse culture shock” when they return to their home college and home country. With that in mind, many American colleges and universities have developed programs to help prepare students not only for living abroad but also for their return home.

Lerstrom (1995) offered an explanation for the reverse culture shock study abroad students experience, based on cognitive dissonance theory. According to Lerstrom, students who go abroad “need to strive for ‘internal consistency’ which is the result of encountering competing cultural systems” (p. 4). The student needs to adjust to ways of thinking and behaving without the benefit of “familiar environmental cues that assist in interpreting others’ behavior and guiding one’s own behavior” (Martin, as cited in Lerstrom, p. 3). Time-off students may also experience this type of dissonance, because they strive for “internal consistency” as a “result of encountering competing cultural systems” (p. 3).

Nick’s Story

Nick took off a year during his sophomore year at a small, private liberal arts college on the east coast. He left school at the end of the fall semester in 2002 and did not return until the spring semester of 2003. One big reason Nick left was that he was in trouble financially. He needed to work and save a lot of money because he “didn’t know how to pay for school.” When one of his friends told him she planned on moving to Chicago, Nick saw it as a perfect chance to get a break and work.

When it came time to return to college, Nick said he “got really lucky,” despite the fact that he had sent in important forms such as his financial aid and housing application after the deadline. His friends in college requested to live with him and he took some advice from a financial aid officer that made him eligible for more financial aid.

When classes started again, Nick said he “had a totally different outlook.” He was more assertive about college. “I set goals for myself as opposed to not having that before. I’m more in charge of my education.” Nick said the biggest adjustment back to the college environment was encountering the paternal approach of the university. Living in a dorm and adjusting to the rules was difficult for him. He was surprised to see ridiculous stuff, like the fact that the cafeteria offered cookies and milk for students late at night.

Nick compared his experience returning back to school with the experience of a study abroad student. However, he noted that there was a stigma on his campus associated with taking time-off from school to work.

“Taking time-off is not held in as high esteem as going abroad,” he said. Other students found it difficult to understand. They said, “You just worked? You didn’t travel to London or anything?”

Nick was not the only student interviewed for this article who found he no longer shared the same values with his peers who had not spent an extended period away from school. The time-off students interviewed for this article all shared a

similar shock and frustration with the clash between university culture and the culture in which they had been during their time-off. Many of them referred to the university community as a bubble, a culture of its own. Furthermore, the time-off students had to integrate dissimilar, often conflicting values with the institution's staff and faculty. Nick felt stifled by the rules in the residence hall; Simon resented the overly intellectual approach of the faculty and staff; Ben, who you will meet later, was frustrated by a few of his professor's insensitive remarks.

Despite the similarities in experience, not all strategies developed to help study-abroad students reacclimate to their home are appropriate for time-off students. After all, time-off students are returning to their college, not their country of origin. However, one of the top ten challenges identified by the students who participated in the program was also expressed by Nick and the other time-off students interviewed for this article. Lerstrom's students were "frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant" (p. 9). Simon, Leah, and Ben all described how other college students lacked the maturity and practical coping skills that they had gained from life outside of college, or outside the bubble.

Discussion

Three themes emerge from the research and student profiles. Time-off students need validation of the experience they had outside of college, peers who share and can connect lived experience with classroom experience, and a peer group or community to which they can belong.

Validation

Time-off students are intellectually involved students (Tinto, 1993). All of the students interviewed for this article discussed being more motivated and focused academically when they returned to school. They discussed setting goals, meeting with their faculty, and connecting to their class work in ways they had never before. However, time-off students also need social integration. This is illustrated in Quianna's story.

Quianna's Story

Quianna entered college for the first time in 1997 at a small, private, liberal arts college in New England. However, by the second semester of her sophomore year, her family began to worry about whether or not they could continue paying tuition. She also said she was burned out from classes. While others thrive on the academic environment, she said she found it depleting. Quianna studied for long hours and did not sleep. She was also not sure if the school was a good fit for her. She said she knew other students but had not found any who she got excited about. The typical student was very serious, "book-smart and on the ladder to success." She had not found any "creative, funky people" like herself. She said she spent a lot of time off campus because she "wanted to meet people outside of the bubble." In the fall of her sophomore year, Quianna decided to finish the school year and then take time-off to work and think about transferring to a different school. Ultimately, she decided to stay at her college but she did not move far. During the summer she took a job as a lab research assistant for one of her professors, which allowed her to live in a residence hall.

Quianna said when school started again, she was ready for it. The only adjustment she had to make was moving into a different residence hall. Socially, it was easy because the people she had worked with on the job were still on campus. She also enjoyed being an older student living in the residence hall. She met a lot of different people and introduced them to the college. She taught them "how to get around the system," she said. Academically, Quianna said she worked a lot and focused on the track to success. She spent hours and hours in the lab without feeling overwhelmed. She said there was a place for her and that she was investing in people.

Time-off students need a group that shares their interests and experiences. For Quianna, her aggregate was the community of workers she found working in the lab. After having spent a year working with them, living in the residence hall again was not intimidating. When Quianna returned to school, she said she felt like she bonded with people on a deeper level. Her story illustrates Tinto's theory of involvement:

Both forms of integration, social and intellectual, are essential to student persistence. Though it is conceivable that persistence can occur when only one is present, evidence suggests that persistence is greatly enhanced when both forms of personal integration occur. (Tinto, 1993, p. 137)

Students who take time-off should be allowed and encouraged to think of their shared experience. More interaction with a peer group such as a student organization or support group will combat the bubble mentality that several students

discussed. Implicit in their discussion and contempt for the “bubble” was that they felt they were outside of it. They should be allowed to meet others who feel they are outside of the bubble. The theory of human aggregate suggests:

. . . individuals are most attracted to and involved in groups of people who share interests and activities and that such groups are most likely to reinforce those interests and activities as congruence between personal needs, skills, and environmental rewards is maximized. (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 147)

Community

Perhaps as important as finding others like themselves, all of the students interviewed discussed a need for community.

Leah's Story

Leah began attending a large, private, east coast university in the fall of 1997. Her major was engineering. After a semester and a half of struggling through difficult, uninteresting classes and poor grades, she began to seriously think about switching her major. She made the final decision over winter break but administrative policies and deadlines made it impossible for her to change majors before the spring semester. Rather than toil through the spring semester in engineering, she decided to take the semester off.

Returning to school in the fall was never in doubt for Leah. She said her transition back into the college community was easy because she kept in touch with her friends while she was away. She had always planned on living off-campus when she returned so she needed to stay in contact with some of her roommates. She was excited about living with her friends again.

Leah said she was surprised by how little had changed about the campus and the other students she knew when she returned. The only thing that seemed to have changed was her. Leah said her time away enabled her to gain a larger perspective on the world and her impact on it. She was grateful for having a “semester to step back and see what was going on. Everyone doesn't have their own credit cards and mommy and daddy don't pay the bills.”

Because of her change in major, Leah took five years to graduate. The extra year distanced her from her peers with whom she had started school. “I was always off of the cycle of emotions from my classmates,” she said. Socially, she said her final year “sucked.”

Leah relied on friends she had before she left school to help her reintegrate. Nick also described himself as lucky to have friends. Simon threw frequent parties in his room and became an RA in efforts to create the community he needed. Quianna used her status as an upperclassman in a residence hall with first-year students to create community by giving the other students tips on how to navigate the system. In each case, the responsibility of finding a peer group fell on the student. When Leah's peer group graduated, she was left with no sense of community. Ben never found that community on campus and found himself having to seek support off campus. It is worth noting that after re-enrolling in college, Ben withdrew again. He is the only student interviewed who has not either graduated or persisted in college after his time-off. One wonders if the outcome would have been the same had there been a peer group for him on campus.

Conclusion

There are two barriers that need to be addressed and avoided in order for student affairs professionals to work with time-off students: (a) the stigma surrounding leaving school, and (b) the (ir)relevance of student support services in time-off students' lives.

Of all the students interviewed, Ben's story best illustrates the time-off students' feelings towards student affairs professionals.

Ben's Story

Ben started school in 2000 at a small, New England, Ivy League school. Ben stayed in school a little over two years. He left because he said he hated the college environment in general. There was not enough diversity of age and socioeconomic class, and too much partying and drinking.

During his year off, he became interested in social work and decided to attend the mid-sized state university in his home state. One reason Ben chose to attend the school was because he was active in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and allied (LGBTQA) community. He believed the university was a welcoming and safe place because of

his communications and interactions with students and staff of the office serving LGBTQA students.

Although he said he was encouraged by the fact that class discussions included LGBTQA people as groups that were oppressed, he was not fully comfortable. Sometimes his faculty would make insensitive comments. When Ben felt a faculty member was being insensitive, he did not share it with the professionals in the LGBTQA Services Office. He said he would have, “had the problem persisted.” He preferred to speak with the faculty member after class.

Ironically, all of his interactions with his university prior to enrolling in classes had been with the LGBTQA Office and other students within that particular community. However, Ben spent as little time as possible on campus. Consequently, the other students within the LGBTQA community and student affairs professionals on campus, with whom he had been communicating, were not a part of his support system.

Ben was the only student who said that student affairs professionals played a role in his decision to transfer or return to school at all. But later, he did not feel like those same professionals were appropriate resources for him. Nick and Quianna both said they had been involved in student organizations before their time-off but when they returned, neither continued their student activism. Simon felt equally disappointed by both student affairs professionals and faculty, saying they were all “fruit from the same poisoned tree.”

Student affairs administrators already know that they can make the difference between a student staying in college and a student leaving. However, if and when students leave college, they can play just as instrumental a role in helping them reintegrate into the college community. That means combating the assumption that leaving college means failure. It also means recognizing that students often return to campus changed personally and academically. We can reach out to and serve

time-off students by extending or incorporating elements of the services traditionally reserved for adult returning students. As Tinto (1993) said:

Leaving college should by no means be taken to mean that individuals terminate their involvement in higher forms of education. Sometimes the opposite is the case. More than a few persons leave the formal world of higher education in order to pursue education in ways not encumbered by the rules and regulations of college life. (p. 211)

Programs and student organizations similar to those for study abroad students or reentry transfer students can be catered to time-off students. Most of all, higher education administrators should recognize the learning and growth that occurs when students leave campus; they should work to remove obstacles that prevent the time-off student from using that new knowledge for the benefit of themselves and others when they return.

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Appendix

**THE IMPACT OF TIME-OFF AND REENTRY ON THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE OF
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND NOTES**

Before you left:

- Briefly describe your reasons for leaving school.
- How long did you think about leaving school?
- How long did you plan to be away?
- What did you do during your time away?
- Did you know what you would do when you left school?
- How long were you gone?
- Did you plan to return to the same university? Why/why not?

Before your return:

- Why did you decide to return?
- Describe the administrative process you had to take to prepare to return (paperwork, policies, etc.)?
- What surprised you? What were your expectations?
- Describe your thoughts or feelings about returning to school.
- What surprised you? What were your expectations?
- What challenges did you face returning to college?

Returning to school:

- Describe how you felt integrating back into the college community.
- Compare the second time you returned to the first time. How was it different or similar?
- How have your attitudes about education or college been affected by your time off?
- What would you like to tell other students who are thinking about leaving?
- What kinds of services or programs would have helped you acclimate to school?