

Boosting Retention for Ethnic Minority Students: Leveraging Peer Leadership

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[Boosting Retention for Ethnic Minority Students: Laying the Groundwork](#)

For this second in a series of articles on supporting the academic success of underrepresented minority students, we interviewed Georgina Dodge, chief diversity officer and associate vice president at the University of Iowa. Dodge shared with us lessons learned and practical tips based on the early success of the University of Iowa's pilot peer mentoring program for ethnic minority students, the [Iowa Edge program](#). Students enrolled in that program show a higher retention rate than the overall retention rate for the institution.

The Thinking Behind Iowa Edge

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

We bring 90 admits a week early. Over a period of that week before classes, they're able to get into their dorm rooms, get settled and established with staff assistance. Then a week to learn about the campus, register, learn about success skills, get acclimated, learn how long it takes to walk from one location to the next. Most important, they form a cohort. They have a group they belong to.

Georgina Dodge, University of Iowa

Underlying the program is Dodge's conviction that when transitioning minority students into the institution, the two factors that will best prepare them for success are:

- Individualized attention from peer leaders
- Forming a peer cohort and support network

The Iowa Edge program uses peer leaders -- upperclassmen who are themselves minority students. Each is assigned a small group of students to lead throughout the weeklong Iowa Edge experience. The upperclassmen are selected, screened, and trained.

"They need to know how to navigate the campus and how to navigate the community," Dodge advises. "They need to know what resources are available that they can refer incoming students to, and they need to know who they can go to with questions. Most of all, we need to help them understand that this is a form of leadership -- that the type of peer mentoring they'll be involved in is what taking leadership in the moment looks like. Students volunteering as mentors may not think of themselves at first as peer leaders."

CHANGES THAT MAKE A BIG IMPACT ON PEER LEADER TRAINING

Before another entering class arrives, learn how a few simple changes can make a big impact on your peer leader training.

[Join us online on June 26, 2013](#) to learn how you can reconfigure your peer leader training by utilizing outcome-based, active learning strategies that model how peer leaders can develop productive relationships with their mentees. Our expert instructor will share ideas for applying this approach to peer leader trainings before and during the term.

The plan at the University of Iowa is to connect incoming students with peer leaders who will work with them during their first two years at the institution. The university plans to recruit faculty and staff to mentor the junior and senior class.

Individualized Attention is Key

Any institution or office within an institution thinking of piloting this kind of program, whether on a large scale or a small effort, needs to be aware going in that the success of the program absolutely relies on offering students individualized attention. This is key to your ability to move the needle on student success.

Georgina Dodge, University of Iowa

Dodge warns, in particular, against the hazard of growing accustomed to thinking of minority student populations as facing a "common set of challenges," and letting that drive the forms of support and orientation you offer to new students. Challenges will differ between particular cohorts and between particular students. Consider these scenarios:

Dodge cites the example of one summer bridge program for high school juniors and seniors from one particular Latino, lower-income area. The program enrolled seven young men and seven young women. By the end of the summer, only one of the young women graduated. What happened? Dodge recalls, "The young women all got called back home to provide childcare for siblings while their parents worked. We learned that this specific population had its own unique challenge to staying in their courses. For them, what was needed wasn't just a summer bridge program or a robust student orientation. We needed outreach to the parents to help them understand the benefits of college for their daughters."

Even within the same student cohort, you will have students who need to overcome issues that others do not. You may have a gifted student who has been exposed to cultural messages where education is not valued. You may have another individual who lacks the academic preparation, though she does have the cultural and family support to persist.

Georgina Dodge, University of Iowa

This is why Dodge advises building a team of peer leaders who can provide the individualized attention your freshmen and sophomores need, and who are trained to connect them with the resources appropriate to the particular challenges they're running into.

What to Do if You're a Small College

A program on the scale of Iowa Edge is a pretty significant investment, funded in this case by an alumni donor. But there are intermediary steps toward that kind of programming that a smaller institution or an office with a smaller budget can undertake. For example:

- Pilot a multicultural visit day, bringing in students from local feeder schools -- if possible, make this a full-day event, allow students to tour the campus and meet with faculty, and then invite them to return for individual campus visits. To make the most of this day, give the students a list of questions that you would encourage them to ask during the campus visit.
- Form a small, informal peer group that can provide a support network to entering minority freshmen, and ensure that the members of the group know what staff are ready to be approached for assistance.

"Invite students to be responsible for each other," Dodge advises. "That's the key principle, whether in a small setting or in a fully funded program."