

FEMALE Let's talk about how can you build support for your seminar and broader success efforts
INTERVIEWER: across your institution.

BETSY: I think in building support for the seminar or anything else you're doing for student success, that the strategy really depends on who you're talking to. If you're talking with primarily faculty, very honestly, they may not care a great deal about student retention. They don't want to talk about it. They may hear it as a synonym for dumbing down, but what is it that vibrant first year seminar would do for them and their students as they progress through the undergraduate curriculum. So there, the focus would be learning. If you're talking to administrators, often, the focus will need to be it's going to improve our student retention rate.

So again, it depends. What if you're talking to students themselves? How could you build support? I think in that case, you talk about how the first year seminar is part of your institutional culture. And students who don't take it will really be at a disadvantage because they won't learn some things that other students will be able to learn. I do think when budgets are tight, building support for anything that is perceived to be extra is very, very difficult. And it's really essential that you do assessment. And I know John will essentially say the same thing, that assessing whatever it is you claim is very, very critical. So if you haven't already developed your goals-- and of course, you have to have goals before you can assess anything-- you've got to take a step back and determine what it is we are reasonably trying to do in this course, and how can we demonstrate that that is happening for the good of the institution, for the good of students, and for the good of faculty.

JOHN: Betsy, I want to follow up immediately on what you said about the importance of assessment. I ran a course for 25 years. And as I look back on that experience, I think the most important thing that I did was to share with the entire college community-- by the way ladies and gentleman, in my case, college meant I taught at a two-year college. I was chief academic officer of five two-year colleges. I also worked on a university campus for much of my career. But in all these contexts, it's very important to share what you're learning from the assessment of the course with the rest of your college community. And then tell people what you did with what you learned. In other words, your outcomes were x, and that made you decide to do y. So you're demonstrating the power in the role of assessment. That will increase the perceived respect for your course.

Another is to teach the students you actually have, not the ones you'd rather have or think you used to be like. And that's a statement that I made recently and got in a public controversy over that. Some fellow educators don't really want to be teaching the students we have. But you've got to have done an analysis of who are the students on your campus. What do they need? What are their most important needs? And this course has got to be designed to direct to those needs.

To build respect for a course often is influenced by who teaches in this course, and who leads this course. And so you've got to go out of your way to recruit some high status people on your campus to teach in this course. People who have really well-known reputations for being outstanding as faculty, as researchers, as leaders. You need to get them involved in your course.

Probably, the best thing that will build support for your course is satisfied students who are going to go talk to other students. And they're going to talk to their families. And that's going to mean that when students enter your institution, they've heard about this course and they will ask to take it. Simple thing you can do, have a campus-wide advisory committee for your course. Have a stakeholder's group. A group that gives you advice and you listen to them. And you tell them what of their advice that you take.

Another thing you need to do is to figure out who's on your campus that this course could be a win-win for them. What units of your institution could you be helping through this course, and then they help you. For example, you've probably got a theater program. Theater programs need students to come to their shows. They want audiences. Well, we also know, though, that students who get excited about going to student-led performances and activities, those students get more excited about being in college stay longer. So the theater department wins, your student wins, your course wins because you're getting students in your course to do things like participate in the arts while they're on campus.

Another strategy would be to recognize that not all your students are the same. You want to create sections of this course for certain sub-populations. We've even had sub-population sections special cohorts for blind students, for hearing-impaired students, for mobility-impaired students, for athletes, for commuting students, for students of certain majors, for students that are older than a traditional age, whatever that means anymore. From students of the same gender, for students of the same ethnicity, there's all kinds of ways you can create special sub-population groups that increase student engagement and support.

But of all that list, I would say that assessment and sharing those outcomes and making decisions based on those outcomes. And not only sharing with your fellow colleagues at the campus, but with families and students. When they come in for orientation, you tell them what your college has learned about this course, and therefore, why students should take this course.