

BETHANY: So tell us a little bit about where the course is today and how it's evolved.

JOHN: Well the course today is almost universal. Just over 90% of the accredited colleges and universities in the United States have some type of course like this book is being used in. So that's a good thing. It shows that higher education is much more committed to the success of students than it used to be.

Today, these courses take many forms. Some of them are one credit, some two credits, some three credits. Some one semester, some two semesters. Half of them are required of all students. The other half are electives. Some of them are taught in residence halls. Some of them are offered for special subcategories of students like commuting students or students in a residence hall or students of certain majors. Some of them are offered as introductions to professional majors like business, education, journalism, nursing, et cetera. So this is a very mature and sophisticated course type now. It's very well established in American higher education.

BETHANY: So light what topics and outcomes are prevalent in the course today?

JOHN: Well, the topics are a function of what type the course is, and that's a function of how many credits and so on, because there's a lot of variety here. But basically what's in common, topics are those that would help students get oriented, become knowledgeable of the institution's services and resources, learn study skills, but also sharpen one's clarity about purpose. That's a fundamental focus of these courses. Why am I in college now, at this place, and what could I do with that? How could college help develop me in ways that perhaps I'm not aware of?

Another topic, hugely important, is time management. Another introduction to the whole world of vocational choices, considering there are thousands of possible occupations. Other topics would be focusing on health and wellness issues. If you're not healthy and maintaining your body as you could, you're not going to be as successful in college. So there's a huge range of topics here that instructors and institutions have to choose from.

Motivation-- we're spending a lot of time looking at student motivation. How might we have enhance that? How might we increase students' abilities to learn? What do they know about their learning styles and preferences-- long list.

BETHANY: So what outcomes are institutions focusing on today through the course?

JOHN: Well the number one outcome is, I'm kind of sorry to say, it's an outcome more for the institution than the students. We want more students to stay here longer. And they will stay here longer if they are more satisfied and if they have been more successful academically, if they've made friends, if they've developed a commitment to a major and an occupation. So in one word, retention. We want more students to be retained.

Now in addition, we also want students to complete. There's the so-called completion agenda. And all states now have a completion agenda. And it's to increase the number of students who earn associate and baccalaureate degrees.

And what we know is if you take a course like this and if you're successful in this course, you're more likely to complete the first year and you're more likely to complete a degree. So retention and completion are the big outcomes.

But there are other outcomes-- increased satisfaction; increased comfort levels that students have; successful socialization of students into a campus; students being able to learn where to get help and to actually go get help; having more students join organizations and activities that are more likely to help them develop commitment to the institution; improving students' writing skills, reading skills, and information literacy skills, their research skills, their communication skills, their technology skills. All of those are a desired outcome. But retention and completion are the number one outcomes. Betsy, see what are the trends you are seeing in the course today?

BETSY: Well I want to back up, Bethany, and think about this course over time to talk about trends. And part of this actually is hearsay, because I didn't come into this whole arena until about 1988. And the course as I know it, through John, really had its aegis in about 1972.

And what I hear is at that point, the course was very touchy-feely, and that students really talked a great deal about their feelings. That was a different point in time in our American history and we were coming out of the 1960s and the student activism movement. So a lot of the course atmosphere, I think, was affected by the time you were in.

Now I think the course is far more academic generally. Many of these courses are linked to other courses that are sort of a learning community format. But another interesting thing is I think that sometimes trends reverse themselves. And I think as the course becomes more

academic, some of us realize that we've sort of lost an important emphasis on the noncognitive variables. And so we're kind of going back to thinking about noncognitive issues as well as academic issues.

BETHANY: What are the key topics you are seeing in the course?

BETSY: Well I think right now, careers are certainly one of the key topics that we're seeing. And we're really debating amongst ourselves, and I think many instructors are thinking, where do you put a focus on careers? Is that something you do first in the course, because careers are linked to motivation of students? Or is that something you do toward the end of the course? And lots of people feel differently about that.

Another important area that we're seeing-- and again, this relates to the whole non-cognitive aspect of student success-- is a real focus on emotional intelligence. There are lots of words that we're hearing thrown around now. Grit is a big one. How do we focus our students on resilience, on the ability to bounce back? And I think that has become a really important topic.

And also academic planning-- obviously planning that would end up in a career, but planning before that career, planning that adheres to one's life preferences, the way students want to live, their personal values, et cetera. So those are three areas that I see, three sorts of topic areas that the course is moving toward.

BETHANY: Great. What are the key outcomes institutions are focusing on through their college success courses?

BETSY: Well I think as John has said, retention continues to be the primary outcome. But there are a number of others. Some institutions link the first year seminar to SLOs or what are known as student learning outcomes. And of course those vary by particular institution. They can be writing, oral communication, numeracy, a variety of different areas in which we want students to improve and demonstrate improvement.

So again, the outcomes can be more or less all over the place. I've heard some instructors yearning for student transformation. That's a pretty broad outcome, one that's very, very hard to measure in the short run. I think it's really important for instructors to develop outcomes that can be measured, at least some outcomes, that can be measured in the short run.

So this is a challenge. But I think, again, linking it to those things that are important for your institution is a very important direction to go.

