November 10, 2000

To: RIT Campus Community

Attached is a paper describing my decision to retain the quarter calendar at RIT. The context and process leading to the decision are discussed. Actual and potential action steps are presented.

I would be most pleased to receive your comments and observations.

Thank you very much for your counsel and input along the way.

Cordially yours,

Albert J. Simone
President
RETENTION AND CALENDAR:

Analysis, Debate, and Decision

Report Submitted to the
RIT Community

by
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November 9, 2000
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INTRODUCTION

In my September 1999 and 2000 Opening Day addresses to the campus community, I identified and highlighted student retention as a major issue at RIT. I expressed strong concern that low retention was a blemish on an otherwise extremely strong record of accomplishment across the campus community.

Retention is defined as the percentage of students who persist at RIT from year to year. For example, from the freshman to the beginning of the sophomore year, 85% of RIT's students persist; from the freshman to the beginning of the junior year, 75% of the students persist. The problem we are addressing relates to retention of freshman through to graduation. Retention among transfer, graduate, and part-time students is not the issue.

The graduation rate is defined as the percentage of a freshman class which graduates within seven years after entering the freshman year (the convention nationally in discussions of student retention is to define graduation rates over a six-year period for non-co-op universities and a seven-year period for co-op universities). For freshmen entering RIT in 1992, 57% graduated by 1999. For the freshman classes entering several years prior to 1992, the graduation rate on average was 60%.

I find these retention and graduation rates disappointing and unacceptable. RIT can and must do better.

Students do not enroll at RIT not to succeed. Parents do not support their children at RIT with the expectation that they will not succeed. Admissions officers do not admit students to RIT thinking that they will not succeed. Student success is the goal and expectation, and rightfully so. Success is measured in terms of graduating from RIT within seven years, having received a quality education, leadership skills, and career opportunities.

What is an acceptable graduation rate? If we examine the caliber of RIT's freshman class, faculty, staff support, academic programs and curricula, extra curricula programs and activities, facilities, student/faculty ratio, dollars expended per student, and academic reputation, and if we compare these attributes with those of peer universities, and if we note the retention rates at these universities, then we can conclude that a graduation expectation of 75% is achievable for RIT. Why are we not realizing a 75% graduation rate? What must we do to reach that level?

In September 1999, I appointed a special Retention Task Force (RTF), led by Associate Provost Kit Mayberry, to answer the questions of why graduation rates were low, what we could do about raising them, and what should the appropriate target be (it was the RTF which established the 75% rate).
The RTF completed its report in June 2000. There was a key surprise recommendation in the report. That recommendation, strongly put, was to change from a quarter to a semester calendar.

The question of a calendar change was thoroughly debated in 1995, as it has been regularly over the years. At that time, I decided to accept the arguments favoring a retention of quarters, and stated in unequivocal terms that I did not want this topic revisited for at least ten years, unless there was a change in circumstances which provided a compelling rationale for reopening the question.

The priority that I established for student retention, coupled with the RTF’s strong recommendation that many retention strategies would be significantly enhanced by a calendar change, opened the door for reconsideration. However, I wanted to confirm the connection between calendar and retention, and, therefore, appointed a “validating” committee chaired by Dean Tom Hopkins.

The Hopkins Committee (HC) deliberated during the summer months, completing its report in August 2000. The HC report did not find that changing the calendar was a necessary condition for improving retention. The HC report stated that a number of retention strategies would work better under a semester system, but could not find sufficient evidence to either affirm the need for a calendar change or reject the desirability of such a change.

These results were presented to the RIT Board of Trustees at the July 2000 meeting for trustee input. The RTF and HC reports were posted to the RIT Web site in August. A full-blown campus-wide discussion was initiated in September 2000 among students, faculty, staff, and administrators. I indicated that I would make a decision whether or not to carry forward the idea of a calendar change by the November Board of Trustees meeting.

A few faculty have questioned the wisdom of taking the RTF report forward given their view that the report did not “prove” that moving to semesters would improve retention. It may never be possible to “prove” the correctness of such a recommendation. My willingness to bring the report forward is based both on the merits of the report and on my confidence in and respect for the analytical ability, experience, balance, and academic instincts of the RTF members, especially its chairperson. I thank the RTF for its careful work over the past academic year.

DEBATE AND VOTE

There has been, by far, more discussion and debate by students, faculty, staff, and administration on this issue than on any other issue that has arisen in my experience at RIT. The discussion has been both passionate and thoughtful. The numerous active and
public discussions, for the most part, have been collegial and respectful of other points of view. In what follows, I shall summarize the results of the process.

Students

Student Government (SG) was instrumental in, responsible for, and committed to obtaining student participation on this issue. In addition to their meetings among themselves and with me, SG organized three student forums (October 3, 4, and 5), one of which took place at NTID and the other two in the Student Alumni Union. Approximately 800 students, together with faculty, staff, and administration, attended these forums, which occurred from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., with individual discussion lasting up to an additional three hours (five members of SG and I wore each other out after the third forum).

SG also implemented on-line voting for students over a three-week period. Informational pamphlets were prepared and distributed by SG for the student body. Advertising and promotional announcements were prepared urging students to respond to the issue by answering a ten-question survey prepared by SG and available on-line.

Computer controls were incorporated to be sure that no student could vote more than once, that only RIT students could vote, and that student anonymity would be preserved.

*Reporter* magazine reported objectively on the discussion along the way.

The sentiments expressed at the student forums were overwhelmingly in favor of quarters over semesters. The on-line voting of 3,200 students was 85% in favor of quarters, 14% in favor of semesters, and 1% indifferent. Students in six colleges favored quarters by a consistent margin ranging from 83% to 87%. One college (NTID) favored quarters by 75%.

Faculty

The annual Faculty Assembly and several Academic Senate meetings, some of them heated, were devoted to this question. The bi-weekly meetings of the Academic Senate Executive Committee with the Provost and me included discussions of this matter.

Each dean surveyed his/her college faculty to determine their preference. Of the 749 eligible faculty, 536 (71%) responded with:

- 33% favoring quarters (47% of those voting; 51% of those expressing a preference)
• 32% favoring semesters (45% of those voting; 49% of those expressing a preference)

• 6% indifferent (8% of those voting)

• 29% not responding

Of those faculty expressing a preference, two colleges (College of Applied Science and Technology and Kate Gleason College of Engineering) each voted 86% in favor of quarters. The other five colleges voted for semesters as follows:

• College of Imaging Arts and Sciences 77%
• College of Liberal Arts 62%
• College of Business 60%
• College of Science 58%
• NTID 52%

The Academic Senate organized a faculty referendum. The three questions posed and the responses are:

• Will moving from a quarter system to a semester system significantly improve our ability to implement successful retention strategies?

  Yes: 125 (25%)  No: 268 (54%)  Undecided: 107 (21%)

• What kind of calendar do you believe is best for RIT?

  Quarter: 223 (44%)  Semester: 202 (40%)  Don’t Know: 85 (17%)

• The administration should encourage and support the various colleges and divisions in their implementation of retention strategies, and defer any action on calendar change until the effect of the retention strategies is evaluated, and a thorough study of all ramifications of a calendar change is conducted.

  Agree: 377 (73%)  Disagree: 141 (27%)

Staff

The Staff Council (SC) met numerous times to discuss the issue, inviting others from the campus community with expertise on this issue to join them. The SC offered interesting analysis and data of their own, and raised relevant questions for future examination bearing on retention.
The following motion was formulated by SC:

The RIT Staff Council strongly urges the administration to encourage and support the various Colleges and Divisions in their immediate implementation of retention strategies recommended by the Retention Task force, as well as strategies of their own, that are calendar-independent, and to defer any action on a calendar change until we have had an opportunity to evaluate the results of those strategies. In addition, we encourage Colleges and Divisions to share best practices and strategies that are currently being employed. A report on the progress of the implementation of retention strategies should be shared with the RIT community during the 2001/2002 academic year.

This motion carried by a vote of 19 in favor, 0 opposed, and 2 abstained.

Administration

After much discussion, the Administrative Council (composed of the Vice Presidents, Chief Information Officer, and other direct reports to the president) unanimously voted to retain the quarter system. A number of complex and wide-ranging considerations entered into this discussion.

The deans voted 5 to 2 to retain quarters. Three of the five votes to retain quarters were close calls.

Institute Council

On November 1, 2000, the Institute Council met to discuss, for the final time, the retention/calendar issue. The Institute Council is comprised of 42 voting members: eleven representatives each from Student Government, Academic Senate (faculty), and Staff Council, the seven deans, Provost, and myself (as chair). The Administration Council (vice presidents and others) sits in and joins in the discussion but does not vote.

Reports by Student Government, Academic Senate, Staff Council, and the Deans were presented and discussed. The following motion was voted on:

Will moving from a quarter system to a semester system improve our ability to implement successful retention strategies, significantly sufficient so as to justify a change in our calendar system?

The vote was - 33 No, 3 Yes, 1 I Don’t Know, and 0 Abstained
Parents

On Saturday, October 14, I addressed several hundred parents in Ingle Auditorium as part of Family and Alumni Weekend. I had spoken with several parents the night before at the Celebration of Scholarship Banquet. The overwhelming sentiment of the numerous parents who spoke, some with passion, on the issue of calendar/retention was in favor of quarters. Several letters from parents reinforce this view.

AN UNEXPECTED AND IMMENSELY CONSTRUCTIVE HAPPENING

The vigorous, often passionate, and sometimes emotional debate over the past two months, at least from my perspective, has breathed life and fresh air into a campus that typically marches forward in productive fashion, often without a great deal of spirit and involvement, and often with a sense of detachment as each person or group vigorously pursues their individual interests. There was a lot of spirit and campus-wide involvement this time around.

And there was commitment and dedication to RIT. There was pride – especially among the students – expressed time and again.

The discussion consistently focussed on educational values, philosophy, and mission. A formally organized symposium on this topic would not have achieved this level of engagement. This discussion brought tears to the eyes of a number of students (and even a few faculty).

Some students said (I do not know if all students would subscribe to this) that they like stress, endless academic work, and tight deadlines. It forces them to manage their time and set priorities. They say RIT is harder than other universities they know. That is why they came here, and that experience is what will differentiate them from graduates of other schools and will enhance their ability to succeed in their careers. They said, “Don’t do anything to change this.”

Some students had an interesting response to retention. I first encountered it (and was much surprised) when a sophomore woman student in a Professional and Technical Communications class I was speaking to said, “Why are you so concerned about the 40% of students who don’t graduate? Many of them probably don’t belong here – they won’t work hard enough, want to play too much, or maybe aren’t smart enough. You should devote your time to the 60% who do graduate, who are tough, who love RIT, and who will carry the RIT banner in the years ahead.” This sentiment has some support statistically in the Student Government survey, in which only 54% of the students say that “retention is a problem that needs fixing” while a surprising (to me) 29% answered in the negative. Obviously, I disagree strongly with the 29%.
I believe the campus-wide discussion over the past two months is the most valuable experience this campus has shared in a number of years. The spirit, passion, and pride exhibited were outstanding. The examination and reaffirmation of educational values, philosophy, and mission were extraordinary. All of this "constructive happening" far superceded the importance of the retention/calendar issue, which opportunely served as an inadvertent catalyst for the "happening."

ARGUMENTS FAVORING SEMESTERS

The strongest argument put forward by proponents of the semester system is that semesters will provide a higher quality education than would be possible with the quarters because semesters will provide a longer period (16 weeks versus 11 weeks) for students to get to know faculty; to assimilate material; to prepare, present, and rewrite papers; and to interact more frequently with other students on team projects.

Other arguments favoring semesters include the following:

- There is more time to recover through "early intervention" from a bad grade or from illness.
- There will be less stress from frequent deadlines and too-fast a pace.
- Time and cost devoted to operational matters will be reduced for students, faculty, and staff alike since there will be 2 instead of 3 break periods during the academic year (for example, 2 instead of 3 class registrations, billings, and final exams).
- Matching and mixing schedules with other universities, most of whom are on semester systems, will be easier.
- The split winter period (3 weeks followed by Christmas break, which is then followed by 7 weeks) will be eliminated.
- Extracurricular activities can be better developed and executed.

ARGUMENTS FOR QUARTERS

The chief argument cited as an advantage for quarters is that students will have up to 50% more courses to select from. This enables students to tailor their curricula to their specific interests and provides a richer array of courses, many of which will be of appeal to future employers.
Other arguments favoring quarters include the following:

- There will be more flexibility, not only in terms of courses taken, but also in terms of starting and stopping their academic work (3 entry and exit points per year instead of 2).
- The variety and diversity of co-op assignments are enhanced.
- The significant cost of a changeover is avoided.
- Some students came here because they preferred the quarter system to the semester system.
- The stress and deadlines associated with quarters is good preparation for the world of work.
- If a student has a bad course or professor, he/she only has to “suffer” 10 weeks instead of 15 weeks. If the course and professor are good, the student can sign up for a second course with that professor.

DECISION

My decision is to retain the quarter calendar.

A number of factors have influenced this decision. I participated actively in the discussion and debate. I attended all six hours of the three student forums; answered approximately 100 e-mails from students and faculty; had the benefit of group discussions with Student Government, Academic Senate, Faculty Assembly, Administrative Council, Academic Council, Staff Council, Institute Council, and parents; and had one-on-one conversations with students, faculty, staff, administrators, and parents. The key factors emerging from all of these conversations and memoranda include the following:

- Many of the advantages of the semester system can be achieved under a quarter system if we work at it; and by staying with quarters, we retain the advantages of the quarter system.
- It would be very difficult to ignore the advice of the student body (I will say more about this later).
• While a majority of the college faculties favored semesters, the faculty as a whole (independent of colleges) favored quarters by a slight margin, while the administration, staff, and Institute Council strongly favored quarters.

• Changing the calendar at this time would distract us from other initiatives, such as *First in Class*, the Capital Campaign, diversity, and new program development. Importantly, it would distract us, ironically, from implementing many of the recommended retention strategies over the next two to four years.

• A strong and unequivocal rationale demonstrating a significant connection between semesters and retention was not (and perhaps cannot ever be) made. Similarly, such a rationale cannot be established in favor of quarters either; however, we already have quarters and, therefore, the case for change does not have to be made in support of quarters.

• I believe the most important factor affecting retention is the attitude of faculty, staff, and administration. I shall deal with this issue fully in a later section on “Action.” In my judgment, the attitude – as this establishes the culture – at RIT must change independently of the calendar if retention is to be impacted.

• Personal, people-to-people contact is essential if we are to improve retention, and this contact is independent of calendar. Again, I shall deal with this in the “Action” section.

In summary, I do not believe that sufficient evidence has been presented to demonstrate that retention would be positively influenced by changing the calendar. Moreover, even if it were to be positively influenced, it is not clear that the positive results would outweigh the short-run and long-run negative fallout that would accompany such a change from the point of view of the total university goals and objectives.

The precise form that a semester system would take, together with the consequences such a system would have on course offerings and content, co-op, and other relevant variables on a program by program basis, was not available. As a consequence, uncertainty, and therefore denial, was created among many people who might otherwise be more positively inclined to consider change.

**INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS ON THIS DECISION**

It has been impossible for me – and for many others – to ignore the strong feelings expressed by 85% of a large segment of the student body in support of quarters. It is not only the quantitative aspect of their expression but, more importantly, the passion, conviction, and emotion with which they expressed their views. It was remarkable and exciting to behold.
Many students were moved to read-up on the issue and search the Web for information. Two of them co-authored a 10-page, single-spaced report, the first draft of which was prepared over the summer. Another student wrote a 13-page, single-spaced report after studying intensively the Retention Task Force report and the Hopkins report.

Student Government (SG) was masterfully organized, and forthright and professional in their representation. SG successfully organized forums and developed computer software to implement an on-line student survey. The on-line voting software and approach can be used as a model to solicit student opinion in the future on matters of importance to the campus community.

I am extremely proud of the way the student body engaged this issue. SG, in particular, made every effort to represent the student body fully while, at the same time, presenting an uncommitted and balanced SG perspective. SG created venues and vehicles for the student body to express itself, and then presented and reported on these results in a comprehensive and professional fashion. SG was extremely well prepared and organized for the presentations it made before the Institute Council. It worked hard to listen to the student body to make sure the rest of the campus heard the student body. SG has my deep appreciation and commendation.

Having said all of this, if I thought, based on “all of my experience and wisdom”, that SG was incorrect in its recommendation after all, I would say “no” to them and try as best I could to explain and communicate my reasons.

However, in the present instance, I cannot do so. My initial “professional” position was in favor of semesters (it still may be). However, the case for the change is not sufficiently strong to override the strong preference expressed by the student body, particularly given the manner (which I have just described) in which this preference was obtained and presented.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the student body for its important work in shaping and influencing an issue which affects greatly the quality of the education that they will receive at RIT.

Most importantly, the work of SG does not end with expressing a preference for quarters versus semesters. Its work, as summarized in its 10-question on-line survey, offers strong suggestions for the campus to consider in the area of attitude, communication, and “respect for students.” We should not ignore these extremely important by-products of the calendar discussion. I shall turn to them in the next section.
ACTION

Now we get down to business. The real work for the coming year, now that the calendar decision is behind us, is to design and implement retention strategies. As the Provost has said several times, this will not be “business as usual.” The RIT culture must change with regard to its impact on students. The change must begin with the faculty, staff, and administration.

I want to return to the issue of attitude that I referred to above. It is a term I have used often since we started talking about retention over the past year. Reporter magazine correctly quoted me in its October 6th issue when it stated that I said, “The most important thing of all in making a difference in student success is not the calendar, but the attitude of faculty, staff, and administration.” The Student Government report on the calendar debate also cites this quote. Attitude is the focus of much of what SG reports from the student survey.

Let me give you a hypothetical example. Let us say that 90% of the faculty and staff at RIT treat students with civility, respect, sensitivity, and a caring attitude. They regard student success as their success. Let us also say that 10% of the faculty and staff exhibit exactly the reverse attributes.

Over a period of a few years, let us say that 30% or 40% of the students come in contact with the 10%, often on more than one occasion. After a while, this 30% to 40% of the student body become turned off. They tell their fellow students how they feel and why, and their fellow students adopt a similar attitude. Now, 60% to 80% of the student body feel negatively about RIT because of the work of the 10%.

As a new freshman class enrolls, and over the first quarter or two comes in contact with upperclassmen, it is infused with the same sentiments. These sentiments are reinforced when the new students also come in contact with the 10%.

Thus, we have a negative culture emerging on the campus with regard to the way many students believe they are treated at RIT – all because of the 10%.

The key challenge for me in improving student retention is changing this culture of negative attitude, which affects a great many – if you believe the survey, a significant majority – of the RIT student body.

How do we meet this challenge? The Retention Task Force suggests a number of strategies. I would like to add the following, some of which are being initiated at this very moment.
Action from the Top and Accountability Throughout the Organization

I am currently holding a series of one- to two-hour meetings with the direct reports of each of my vice presidents and the Chief Information Officer. At each meeting, the responsible vice president/CIO is present. My message is two-fold.

First, I am asking each of the direct reports to reflect on my previous conversation of attitude. I say that each direct report has approximately 10% of the people reporting to him or her not doing the job because of a bad attitude, as discussed above. That means 90% of the people reporting to them are doing their job. I am asking the direct reports to have the 90% people be on the lookout for the 10%. In every division, the 90% know who the 10% are. When a 90 percentee sees a 10 percentee behaving improperly (sometimes this may be inadvertent), I want the 90 percentee to advise, counsel, coach, and instruct the 10 percentee on the way we need to do things at RIT. If the 90 percentee meets resistance or, over time, sees no positive result, I want the 90 percentee to inform his or her supervisor about the 10 percentee, so that the supervisor can take appropriate action. I fully expect that in most of these cases, when coaching and advising have not worked at the peer level, that the appropriate action will be to fire the 10 percentee. I expect that to happen.

Some of the 90 percentees may say that being a coach and whistleblower for the 10% is not part of their job description. I beg to differ. The work, or lack of it, of the 10 percentee reflects on everyone and does damage to the student-focused university all of us value. The 90 percentees have a professional obligation, in my view, to improving the organization in every way possible, including identifying and intervening with the 10 percentees. This leads to my second point.

I also am telling the direct reports that as far as I am concerned, some of them may be 10 percentees. If so, they are on notice. In fact, I rather doubt that there are many 10 percentees among those direct reports, since I know the vice presidents/CIO so well. I believe each one runs a “tight ship” with regard to serving the needs of students and the attitude that is necessary in that regard.

However, I am telling the direct reports that if, over time, I continue to receive across my desk validated examples of lack of service to students, brought to my attention by parents, students, and personnel at RIT, and if there is no rational explanation for it, then that particular vice president/CIO is not doing his or her job. I do not have the time or the inclination to do their job – they are paid to do it. In a case such as this, I will need a new vice president/CIO.

Currently, I believe I have a “dream team” of vice presidents/CIO. I would not want to lose any one of them. In some cases, it has taken a long time for me to find them. They work well together and with me.
However, something is happening in the system. Ultimately, I am accountable. If I cannot solve this problem, I should be replaced. I can assure you I will not let that happen until I have tried everything I can think of to solve the problem – if I cannot, then I ought to leave.

I am serious about this. The most important thing that we can do to improve student retention has very little to do with the calendar or with the specific programs we might introduce or monies we might spend. It has to do, in my judgment, primarily with the attitude of every faculty, staff, and administration member on campus. Everyone has to have the proper attitude in dealing with students.

Students certainly are not always right. Certainly, we cannot give them everything they ask for. However, I make the assumption that when any student or parent walks into my office, or writes a letter, or makes a phone call, they are correct in what they are requesting should happen. I do not ask “what the rule is or what the policy is”; I simply look at the situation. The student or parent is right starting out; if they do not prove themselves wrong, we need to work things out to give them what they ask for. I expect everyone to behave in this fashion.

Rules and policies are made to provide order out of chaos. However, no rule or policy can ever be written that will cover every single situation in a way that will be absolutely fair and rational to every individual. Exceptions have to be made. Sensitivity and care have to be exhibited. We have to be decision-makers, not robots.

In short, the debate over the past year, especially the last couple of months, has told me that some of the goals that I and others have set for this university are not being met because, I believe, of the actions of a few. Over the past year, I have received approximately 100 letters from parents and students outlining examples of lack of service and attention to their needs. In each case, I referred the situation to the appropriate vice president or the Ombudsperson. In almost every case, the conclusion was that there was merit in the complaint and corrective action was taken.

What about the cases that do not come to my attention and that are not corrected? What about the ill will that is generated before the situation is corrected, and which can never be recovered? I think the answer is low retention.

All that I am asking and requiring is that everyone does the job for which they are paid. That job starts with the students and ends with the students. Student success means graduating with a rich collegiate experience and being appreciative of the opportunity. The students are telling us that we have a long way to go and I am listening to them. We all should.
In this regard, I recommend that you review the document prepared by Student Government titled, “Report on the Calendar Debate”, November 1, 2000. Copies are available in my office. This report presents the results of the student on-line survey and interprets those results. The report had a sobering impact on me. I was not at all surprised with it, given the ongoing conversations I have had with this year’s Student Government. It is consistent with my conversations with last year’s Student Government, which was equally committed and energetic. Finally, it is consistent with the extensive communication I have had over the past couple of years with students, parents, and certain university personnel.

Incidentally, what we are experiencing here is, in my judgment, typical of what is going on at most college campuses today. In fact, we may be relatively better off than most of these. However, that is absolutely no excuse and, as far as I am concerned, is irrelevant.

We know what we stand for at RIT – in words. Our actions have to be consistent with the words so that the outcomes make them real.

As far as I am concerned, my discussion on attitude in this report is the most important message for the campus community. I implore you all to take it seriously.

Student Advisors and Advocates

I would like to introduce a program in which each incoming freshman is assigned an upperclassman who will serve as a student advisor/advocate to that freshman. The student advisor/advocate would be in contact with the freshman in the summer before the freshman arrives on campus, would meet him/her on campus during move-in day, and would take responsibility for introducing the freshman to the campus. The student advisor/advocate would have a prescribed schedule and program for interaction with the freshman over the entire freshman year.

The student advisors/advocates would be carefully selected, trained for their role, and well paid. This assignment would be their part-time, on-campus employment. They would be closely coordinated and supervised by a staff member solely committed to this project. The purpose of this approach is to make sure we keep track of every student so that those who need guidance will readily have it from a committed peer who “has been there before.”

This program would be introduced in conjunction with a vastly upgraded, defined, and monitored faculty advising program. Both of these programs would be fully coordinated with the First Year Enrichment/Wellness Program that was introduced this year.
This is a concept and idea. Details have to be worked out. We cannot have business as usual at this university and effect the change that is required. I think this step by itself will do much more than any particular calendar change could hope to accomplish, and I would prefer to put the money here than in revamping our calendar software and systems.

**First Year Enrichment/Wellness**

This program, as everyone will recall, was introduced this year after much controversy and turmoil over the past year. We must assess it thoroughly to see whether it is working, how it can be improved, and how it can be integrated with other retention strategies.

I initially asked for the First Year Enrichment/Wellness Program in order to deal with risky behavior on the part of students – abusive use of alcohol and drugs, unprotected sex, depression, and suicide. Since these behaviors affect retention, and since some of these behaviors may be spurred by certain aspects of the campus, the First Year Enrichment/Wellness Program was expanded to deal with issues of transition from high school to college and integration across all aspects of campus life. Accordingly, topics involving time management, healthy lifestyles, learning styles, and where to go for help on campus are a part of this new program.

This program is expensive. It can have a major positive impact on retention. We need to assess it carefully at the end of this first quarter and at the end of the academic year to be sure that it is an integral part of our overall retention effort.

**Benchmarks**

Some programs at RIT have an extremely high retention rate, exceeding our target number of 75%. Do these results occur by chance? I suspect not.

We have to get inside of these RIT benchmark programs and find out what the faculty and staff are doing to get these outcomes. Maybe the students in these programs have particular attributes that will instruct us about the kind of students who stay at RIT.

In short, over the next year, we will learn everything we can about exemplary programs at RIT so that they can be adopted elsewhere on our campus.

**Freshman College**

Provost Stan McKenzie will present, tomorrow, a new concept that the deans are developing in order to maintain some of the retention advantages of semesters while still retaining the quarter system.
The “Freshman College” involves starting the academic year three weeks later (and finishing the academic year later) for all students except freshmen. This late start eliminates a major problem with the current calendar, which splits the winter quarter into a 3-week and 8-week segment because of the Christmas break, making the winter quarter extremely problematic from a learning perspective.

The main reason, however, for starting the quarter later for everyone except freshmen is so that we can start the academic year for freshmen at the normal time (right after Labor Day), giving them three initial weeks on the campus without the overwhelming busyness that accompanies the start-up of a 15,000 student operation.

The freshman class will “own” the campus for three weeks. All programs will be designed specifically for them. They will have a chance to bond with one another and make contact with their student advisors/advocates (above) and faculty advisors. An intensive review of mathematics (which appears to be the most significant academic hurdle faced by freshmen) can be undertaken for those who need it. The First Year Enrichment/Wellness Program can become a 14-week instead of an 11-week program. Students can have the time to be introduced properly to Rochester and the greater Rochester region. There are many other ideas that will impact very positively on retention because of this Freshman College concept. In fact, the Freshman College concept may improve retention in ways that a traditional quarter or semester system could not match.

This is an exciting new idea which the faculty and staff will have to refine and develop. I would like to see it implemented partially or fully this coming September.

CONCLUSION

RIT faculty and staff are doing a lot of great things. My report to the campus each September summarizes many of them. We should all be proud of what we are accomplishing in general. Graduating students are extremely well prepared, because of the outstanding education and extracurricular experience they receive, for successful careers over their lifetimes. Our alumni are living examples of this.

However, our low retention rate is a significant blemish on this record. We must remove this blemish.

I believe a negative culture has developed among much of the student body, which works against retention and spreads this blemish even to people who graduate. The cause of this culture of negativism, I believe, is the unacceptable behavior of a relatively small number of faculty, staff, and administrators who, for whatever reasons, forget or cannot
deal with the reason they are here. That reason is to support our students in every way so that they can – by working hard – succeed at RIT.

There may be some system flaws. We have to find them and fix them. It may be that poor service to students is a result of insufficient staffing in certain areas at certain times of the year; if this is the case, we should provide the additional staffing.

However, having granted the above points, I remain convinced that we need to do more on behalf of our students. They are here to learn and we are here to serve them. That service does not mean that we give them everything they ask for. In fact, we may give them only a small amount of what they ask for at a given time and that may be totally appropriate.

The point is, our interactions with the students need to be civil, respectful, supportive, and helpful. In addition, when we do not give them what they ask for because it is not appropriate, we have to communicate the reasons fully and with the appropriate attitude.

I am asking faculty, staff, and administration to embrace this concept and broaden their scope of responsibility to influence those among them who are not doing the job and, if that fails, to identify those people to their supervisors. I am holding all supervisors, including myself, directly accountable for achieving results.

As the campus knows, I mean what I say and say what I mean. So, these are not idle words. I expect results and will act accordingly.

I am asking the entire campus to get behind our students. I want all of us to work as hard as we can to make it possible for each student at RIT to be everything that he or she can be.

Let me end with a statement that hangs in the briefing room at Campus Safety:

“Students are the most important people on our campus. Without them, we would not even be here. They are not to be ‘put off’ so we can do our own thing. They are our thing. They are not to be considered an interruption to our work… they are the purpose of it.”