

Mizzou's  
retention  
programs



# Keep the new kid on the block

by JOAN M. MCKEE



Top, Dr. Vicki Curby, left, who teaches a small group session of the Freshman Year Experience Course, invited students to her house for dinner at the end of the semester. Middle left, Students Organized Against Racism discuss prejudice and racism with freshmen who are enrolled in the Freshman Year Experience Course. Middle right, Dr. Mary Bixby coordinates the freshman course. Right, students get help with assignments in the Learning Center's math lab.



Who can forget the first semester of college — enrolling in the wrong class, the long lines in Jesse Hall or Brady Commons, the professors who seemed to speak another language, the endless maze of books in Ellis Library, the dorm food that added 15 pounds to your physique and trying to get a date for Homecoming. That's not to mention the papers and essay tests you had to write.

It was almost enough to make you go home to Mom and Dad. And in the Big Eight universities, on an average, 24 out of every 100 freshmen drop out after their first year because of these and other factors. But that's not how it has to be, says Dr. Mary Bixby, who teaches the Freshman Year Experience Course: Learning Strategies For College Students. Thanks to this class, MU freshmen are not only learning how to survive their first year, but also how to succeed in college.

The program started in 1988 with 115 freshmen. Students who enrolled in the pilot class averaged a lower ACT score than the freshman class at large. So according to national figures, their expected dropout rate after two semesters was 30.8 percent. But Bixby was pleased to report that the dropout rate for the pilot class was only 15 percent.

"The purpose of the class is to get the students off to the best start possible," Bixby says. She also is the coordinator of reading and study skills at the Learning Center, which provides free academic assistance to MU students.

"This course not only covers academics, but also covers social and personal issues, too," Bixby says. "To get off on the right foot, students must learn about a variety of issues important to their lives, including health and personal safety, as well

Jeff Adams photos

### Class survival

- Pre-enroll to get the best schedule.
- Get a doctor's excuse when you are too ill to take a test.
- When dropping a class, be sure to fill out the necessary forms.

### Word processing

- Know where the computer sites are on Campus.
- Sign up for a lesson in word processing early in the semester.
- Learn computer tips from other students.

### Managing Time

- Short, intense studying is best.
- Take advantage of time between classes.
- Save time to relax.
- Don't wait until the end of the day to study.

as Campus resources available to them. High school just doesn't prepare them for all they need to know."

Last fall two classes totaling 450 students met three times a week to learn how to be more effective students. In one lecture each week, Bixby teaches class survival skills such as note taking, time management, how to take tests, listening strategies, how to preregister and how to prepare for finals. "The whole essence is responsible decision making and realizing that you have options," Bixby says.

"Some kids are making it by studying all the time, and they have no lives. They need to find better ways to do things. I try to trouble-shoot for them so they can be efficient and productive," Bixby says. "The students want to succeed. But for many of them, they need to make changes, and it's hard. I explain to them why cramming and all-nighters don't work and give them a chance to see other options."

One struggling student realized she was failing a class, Bixby says. Because of the Freshman Year Experience, the student learned how to withdraw from the class without failing. Her grade point average was saved.

For Scott Galloway, a freshman from Springfield, Mo., majoring in international business, the class taught him essential study skills. "I was not real disciplined with my study habits, and the class helped quite a bit. I used to watch television between classes, but now I study."

At the second class meeting each week, students are given a chance to learn from outside speakers. Topics include racism and discrimination, abusive behavior, sexuality, safety of women on Campus, adjustment to college life and career planning.

In one session, the students listened to issues concerning survivors of assault and abuse. "Some issues made the students uncomfortable, but for some, these were the most important lectures," Bixby says.

"The speakers didn't just lecture, they talked to us," says Jennifer Dunn, a freshman from St. Louis. "Even in the large class, it was personal."

Once each week, the large lecture class breaks into small discussion groups of about 25 students. Each group is taught by two members of the MU faculty or staff, and students decide with their instructors what they want and need to learn.

For Kelly Becker, a freshman from Lone Jack, Mo., the small groups were helpful. The group discussion leaders referred the students to people on Campus who could help them with their problems, Becker says. "Through guest lectures, we met the important people on Campus."

Many of the speakers and instructors gave the students their phone numbers. "I wouldn't hesitate to call a professor," Dunn says. "They are so friendly."

"We can't be all things to all students," Bixby

says. "But through the class, the students become so much more integrated into the system. They know where to turn."

Starting in the fall, two sessions will be taught in both the fall and winter semester. The course is not required, but advisers encourage all freshmen to enroll. The class also helps students with a strong academic background, says Dr. Vicki Curby, an instructor in one of the small sessions and acting director of the Learning Center. "Many of them didn't have to study in high school, but they have to in college and they haven't learned how."

The Freshman Year Experience is just one part of the University's retention programs. Leading the effort is the Learning Center in 231 Arts and Science Building. Its primary mission when it was started under a federal grant in 1976 was retaining disadvantaged students, Curby says. Now MU has funds for a variety of academic programs that benefit all types of students. Statistics for 1988 show that the retention rate for all MU freshmen who did not use the Learning Center was 65 percent. But for freshmen who use the Learning Center, the retention rate is 83 percent.

**T**he retention percentage for all first-time freshmen who return for their sophomore year has been going up steadily for the last four years, says Dr. Gary Smith, director of admissions and registrar. In 1985, MU's retention rate was 76 percent. Thanks to higher admissions standards and academic programs across Campus like the Learning Center, the percentage in the fall 1988 rose to 80 percent.

"We focus on students in their first two years of college," Curby says. "Each year, we see one-half to two-thirds of all freshmen, so they are in the minority if they don't use the Learning Center."

Last year, 6,731 students attended 56,218 hours of individual or group instruction. In all, 38 percent of all undergraduate students used the center last year.

The programs are varied. Students who are having trouble with a paper or need help with reading or study skills can get individual instruction. Most of the students are helped in group sessions. Each semester, group sessions and test reviews are offered in areas such as accounting, anthropology, biology, chemistry, physics, economics, engineering, foreign languages and mathematics.

"Students do better if they come to the help sessions early in the semester and often, but we have rescued some students near the end of the semester," Curby says.

The Learning Center helps all types of students. "We see Curators Scholars who want to maintain their A's to students who are failing," Curby says. "There is no stigma attached to using the Center."

"It's good that students can get help from someone who is not giving them a grade. Our motto is: 'The only dumb question is the one that isn't asked.'" 

#### Get involved

- Develop new friendships by joining a Campus or community activity that matches your interests.
- If you can't find one, start your own.

#### Professors

- Know your professors' office hours.
- Use opportunities in class to ask questions.
- Ask for hints on how to study.
- Learn the professor's goals for the course.

#### Study skills

- Find out if it's best to read the textbook assignments before or after class.
- Study lecture notes and textbooks together.
- When taking notes, use space on the page to show how things are related.