'Nobody cares': the challenge of isolation in school to university transition

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Abstract

Drawing on a longitudinal study of a cohort of students moving from secondary school to university in Victoria in 1997, this paper considers perceptions of isolation and the identification of the university student as an 'isolated learner' among senior secondary students. Quantitative and qualitative research among these students in the first year of university suggest that these expectations of isolation are not always met, and that the quality and nature of their contact with university teachers does have an important affect upon their levels of satisfaction and commitment. The importance of contact, interest, approachability and care is supported by other studies, and suggests that institutions carefully examine and address the level and the nature of interaction between university teachers and learners, especially in the first year of study. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of some results of strategies to increase contact and show care in one university faculty.

Introduction

Studies of successful transition from school to university, and especially of the best indicators of persistence, show isolation to be a major problem for many new students. Research among a cohort of students moving from the final year of secondary school to the first year of university in Victoria confirms that while most students expect to become isolated learners in tertiary institutions where 'you're just a number, nobody cares', post-enrolment experiences can play a major role in committing students to particular courses and institutions. While other learners necessarily play a major part in welcoming and embedding new students into the tertiary environment, this paper focuses on the important roles of university teachers and administrators and briefly describes programs under development in one institution which acknowledge the difficulties of isolation and attempt to tackle some of its causes and consequences.

Student perceptions of the 'isolated learner'

This paper draws on research which tracked a cohort of students who completed Year Twelve in 26 Victorian state, independent and Catholic schools in 1996 and commenced tertiary study in 1997.[1] Rather than depending upon snapshots of different groups of students at different stages of the process, this research is therefore able to describe the expectations and experiences of one cohort, as well as their reflections on transition at the end of their first year.

One factor which stood out in the questionnaire and focus group responses of final-year secondary students in 1996 was their expectation that university education would be fragmented and highly individualistic and that universities expect students to be completely independent. Indeed, the very features of transition which were most welcome — in particular, independence and freedom — were also the major sources of anxiety for these students, irrespective of gender or school background. In questionnaires, 'independence' or 'freedom' were the two most common words used to describe the differences between school and university, accounting for 37% of completed responses. 'More freedom' was the single largest response to a question about what would make university enjoyable, and nearly half of the students used the words 'freedom' or 'independence' in their responses to this question. Significantly, however, 44% of those describing anxieties about transition also referred to independence and freedom, and two-thirds of all responses to an open-ended question about potential transition difficulties were in some way related to fears of potential isolation and 'being a number'. While the single

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[1] See endnote.

largest anxiety concerned 'workload' (8% of individual responses), the other most frequent responses described tertiary institutions as daunting, anonymous and uncaring: 'not being known/being alone' (7%), 'it's so big' (6%), 'finding help from teachers' (5%) and 'not knowing anybody' (5%).

Clearly, the greater degree of independence and freedom associated with university is perceived as both an opportunity and a challenge. It is something to which students aspire, but is also seen as potentially perilous. Secondary students anticipate a significant social and academic transition and associate the move to university with much greater independence. This not only creates the potential for significant disappointment and disillusionment should their experiences be negative, but also heightens their anxiety about the differences between school and university. Particularly in the focus group discussions, students described themselves as highly dependent upon the discipline and organisation provided by secondary teachers, and anticipated in very vivid terms the difficulties of adjusting to what they regarded as a fragmented and isolated tertiary learning environment. Their characterisations of university study included: 'you become a nobody', 'you're really insignificant', 'there are no consequences and no help at university', 'who watches you, who notices you?', 'at school, there's structure everywhere, and teachers help us do everything; at uni, you'll be completely on your own', 'you're left to fend for yourself', 'no one will know your name, no one will care if you're there or not', 'I get the feeling that we will be nothing to them'.

This version of the university as an anonymous system in which students are reduced to mere numbers was shared by male and female students, and across different schools in metropolitan and regional Victoria. Male students, particularly those from single-sex independent schools, were more likely to anticipate a lack of discipline and rules (and haircuts) and to speculate about the pleasure of having 'no one on your back', while students from regional centres, who often expected to have to leave home, were more likely to talk about 'being lonely'. Yet the consistency of this perception across different student groups is the most striking feature of the results. By the time they complete their secondary schooling, a majority of students planning to attend university have developed a perception of tertiary institutions as deliberately uncaring places in which no-one, as one videotaped interview participant put it, 'will give you the time of day'. These students come to university convinced that no-one will help them. Anticipating no support, and often unprepared to entertain the possibility that help might be found somewhere, they define a 'successful university student' as someone who neither needs help nor expects to receive it.

Derived in part from friends and siblings already attending universities, this is a 'common sense' about universities widely shared among senior secondary students. Parents and teachers also reinforce it. 'While parents make few direct comparisons, the anticipation of greater adult freedom, and the clear expectation of most parents that the successful completion of Year Twelve marks a fundamental boundary beyond which help and support will decline, reinforce students' impressions that they will be 'on their own' once in university. Teachers make a more direct contribution. In focus groups, students in 20 of the 26 schools described such messages from teachers as 'you won't have people chasing you next year', 'there'll be no one making sure you do your work next year', 'at university, no one will give a damn if you don't pass', 'you're just a number there', and 'you'll have to do it all by yourself once you're at unit Certainly, there are good intentions behind these descriptions: teachers are conscious of the degree to which Year Twelve has become, in many schools, a highly structured and dependent learning process, and they want to prepare their students for the very great differences that await them in the tertiary world. But these messages help confirm a potentially damaging expectation that universities, as a whole and as a rule, take no responsibility for student welfare and progress and may also increase the likelihood that once at university, students will not expect to find help when they need it.

Overall, the perception of university study shared by almost all of these Year Twelve students dwelt upon 'freedom' and 'isolation' as two sides of the same transition coin. By leaving school, they would leave a place described most often in child-like terms — 'spoonfeeding' or 'the cradle' — and enter into a world of highly autonomous learning and living. Their transition would be dramatic, sudden, and possibly traumatic, but it would make them into 'university students'. In their eyes, the only buffer against loneliness and 'being a number' lay in their ability to make or maintain friendship networks, whether by sharing classes with established school friends, or by quickly developing new social links with other first-year students. They were, as (Tanya Kantanis, 1997) has pointed out, setting themselves an extremely

daunting and difficult task, and at a time when they expect less guidance, little encouragement, and almost no support other than that of their peers. Certainly, they were almost completely convinced that university teachers and universities as institutions would simply not care.

Experiences of isolation

What, then, of their first year of university? Did experience accord with perceptions of isolation? The more than two hundred students who continued their participation in this study were almost entirely those who had enrolled in tertiary courses, at thirty different university campuses, and participation rates were highest among those who are, according to most research, most likely to persist: females, students with university-educated parents and siblings, and those with relatively high tertiary entrance scores (McClelland and Kruger 1993; West *et al* 1986). However, the experiences of this relatively successful group do suggest some important conclusions. Focusing on their experience of university teaching and their relationships with university teachers, for instance, most did not describe themselves as completely isolated learners, and had found patchy, if important, support and interest among their lecturers and tutors. The results of the first questionnaire and focus groups, held in April, showed that most students had experienced what they described as 'good teaching' and had developed clear ideas about the differences between effective and ineffective university learning. Tables 1 and 2 show responses to

Table 1. Identification of factors in effective learning

Question: Thinking of the subject in which you feel you are learning most, which of the following have been important or very important in allowing you to learn effectively?

Factors	% important (n=160)	% very important (n=160)
Clearly explained subject objectives and expectations	58.1	8.1
Clear criteria for assessment and practical tasks	55.0	6.3
Adequate guidance in how to carry out assessment or practical tasks	48.1	10.0
Enthusiasm of the teacher(s)	56.3	18.1
Teaching skills of the teacher(s)	61.3	18.1
Easily accessible teachers able and willing to help	46.3	8.1
Other	12.5	5.0

Table 2. Identification of factors in ineffective teaching

Question: Thinking of the subject in which you feel you are learning least, which of the following have been important or very important in making it harder for you to learn effectively?

Factor	% important (n=160)	% very important (n=160)
Unclear subject objectives and expectations	43.8	6.3
Few or no criteria for assessment or practical tasks	28.8	3.1
Inadequate guidance in how to carry out assessment or practical tasks	45.0	7.5
Lack of enthusiasm of the teacher(s)	27.5	5.6
Poor teaching skills of the teacher(s)	40.6	11.3
Teachers hard to find and seem unwilling or unable to help	28.1	3.1
Other	20.6	3.8

questions in the first questionnaire that asked students to identify the factors that characterised the subjects in which they learned most and least.

Students' identification of key factors in effective and ineffective learning included what might be described as the 'practical' elements of good instruction (guidance, criteria, and clear objectives), yet the enthusiasm and teaching skills of university teachers were also significant. 'Teaching skills' is a rather vague term, of course, and in the second questionnaire, conducted in October, students were asked to describe these in more detail by indicating the most important factor which distinguished a effective lecturer from an ineffective lecturer, and how a tutor or demonstrator could be most effective in helping them to learn. These results are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Identification of an 'effective' lecturer

Question: What is the most important factor that distinguishes an effective lecturer from an ineffective lecturer?

Factors	% (n=146)
Interesting content and presentation, maintains attention	32.9
Clarity, organisation, focus, aids comprehension	21.2
Interested in and responds to students, enthusiasm	16.4
Effective use of teaching technologies, notes and aids	6.8
Other	2.1
Not answered	20.7
Total	100.0

Table 4. Identification of an 'effective' tutor or demonstrator

Question: In your experience, how can a tutor or demonstrator be most effective in helping you to learn?

Factors	% (n=146)
Approachable, takes an interest in students	22.6
Ensures understanding, uses good examples	19.9
Answers questions and explains work	16.4
Involves students and encourages discussion	12.3
Relates lectures to the subject material	7.5
Other	4.8
Not answered	16.5
Total	100.0

Again, these results suggest that while students focus on the skills of communicating information and on presentation, they also regard such characteristics as enthusiasm, approachability, and the demonstration of 'interest' in students as crucial elements of effective teaching and learning, especially in the case of tutors and demonstrators. Focus group and videotaped discussions confirmed that good teachers were generally characterised as those who actively sought to engage students and make learning enjoyable (especially through the use of interesting examples and materials and through humour), involved students as a group and appeared to take a real interest in students as individuals.

Essentially, good teachers addressed and challenged the perception of the isolated learner which most of these students brought to the first year of university. Poor teachers, on the other hand, confirmed those perceptions: not only were they boring and uninterested, they also made students feel very unimportant. Significantly, too, focus group discussion of teaching skills revealed a strong and consistent preference for face-to-face instruction in the company of other learners. In other words, their early experiences of good teaching had confirmed these students' identification of effective learning as including human interaction, collaboration and involvement. And they wanted more of their lecturers and tutors to be like their best lecturers and tutors: interested, approachable, encouraging, helpful.

At the same time, these students were not making great demands of their university teachers and were certainly not experiencing good teaching across the board. For example, one of the most common characteristics of their 'best teacher' was that she or he knew their name and seemed to know who they were; in other words, a fairly basic expectation that students would be known by someone was usually experienced only from one or two 'best' lecturers or tutors, not most. While 80% of the respondents to the first questionnaire agreed that they would feel able to approach most of their lecturers and tutors for help with an assignment, 37% had not sought help of any kind by April, less than half of those who did reported adequate guidance, and 45% said that they could think of few or no university staff whom they might approach for help with a general question about adjusting to tertiary study. In the second questionnaire in September, 38% of the respondents reported never seeking 'extra assistance or advice', and 13% of those who had did not receive what they regarded as 'adequate' assistance. Among a group characterised by relatively greater academic success and a higher likelihood of persistence, these are troubling figures.

Focus groups of students from different universities added human detail to these problems. They shared stories about 'the lecturer who runs away and refuses to talk to you', a lecturer who began the first lecture with 'two-thirds of you will fail and it's not my problem' and another with 'I don't want to be here so don't ask me for advice', the lecturer who said she was too busy to help everyone so she wouldn't be offering help to anyone, or the tutor who warned his group that he knew all the VCE students had cheated or been spoonfed and there would be no essay advice in his class. No doubt some of these stories are apocryphal, perhaps some didn't really happen. But as with all apocryphal stories, the most important fact for institutions is not whether they are true or false, but that students are able to believe them as undoubtedly true and representative. They suggest that some students — and perhaps many in particular courses — receive relatively direct messages, from very early in their university careers and from those individuals who are the institution as far as students are concerned, that they are unimportant, that they have no real place other than to take up space in lecture theatres, and that no one really gives a damn how they fare. If we accept Pascarella and Terenzini's (1983) conclusion that experiences after enrolment are crucial in confirming or challenging prior expectations, as well as Macdonald's (1997) contention that early experiences provide a kind of 'script' or path which powerfully shapes subsequent interactions with the institution and its staff, these shared stories should be a major concern.

It is also important to recognise that in their responses on questionnaires and in focus groups, the students in this cohort were not wanting to develop or maintain the kind of dependency on teachers which most had experienced during the final year of secondary school. Even before they left school, they were identifying 'no spoonfeeding' and 'more independent learning' as experiences which would make university more enjoyable. These students do not want more school teaching; they want good university teaching: adult, independent, self-reliant, but still including those relationships with teachers which they regard as essential to understanding content and enjoying the learning process.

Overall, the written responses on questionnaires and the focus group discussions suggest three different experiences of university teaching. The first and least common experience was an unexpected level of support from and interaction with university teachers: 'I'm not as independent as I thought I would have to be. The tutors are extremely helpful, so I have found the change over easier than expected'. In nearly 10% of the first questionnaires, some reference was made to university teaching being 'less impersonal' than expected, or to lecturers and especially tutors being more approachable than anticipated. For these students, transition had often been unexpectedly smooth because at least some of their lecturers and tutors had offered what John Whitehouse (1998) has cogently described as an 'active welcome': enthusiasm and apparent pleasure in teaching, a commitment to know and individualise students, a learning environment which encouraged interaction with teachers, and a characterisation of university study as demanding independence but not isolation.

The second experience was most common: these students were able to identify good teaching but had also experienced what they described as poor teaching and lack of interest or care. They had sought and gained advice and assistance from some university teachers and not others, found some approachable and some almost defiantly inaccessible, and were in general satisfied with, if not completely encouraged by, their interactions with university staff. They had discovered enough of what they described as good teaching to encourage persistence and commitment. In other words, at least one or two lecturers or tutors had displayed interest, cared about their progress, and provided assistance; in combination with their own commitments to their studies and the often slow but steady building of a friendship network and involvement in clubs and student life, this had helped them through their first semester.

The third experience represents the most difficult problem for institutions. For these students, prior expectations of an isolated, anonymous world, in which university teachers have very little regard for their undergraduates, had largely been confirmed. This group comprises what McInnis and James (1998) call 'the dissatisfied school leavers'. In common with their findings and earlier research (Abbott-Chapman *et al* 1992; West *et al* 1986), my qualitative data suggest that these students were particularly likely to focus on poor feedback, uninterested and unenthusiastic teachers, and the feeling that 'no one cared' or took any interest in their progress. They also linked together feelings of loneliness and isolation from peers and from teachers. Responses on questionnaires included 'I was not prepared for uni life in the sense that

no-one cares if you do your work or not'; 'VCE was spoonfeeding, but this is like guessing'; 'students lose interest and motivation and end up dropping out, simply because they didn't feel as though they fitted in'; 'the feeling of loneliness I experience . . . [because] I'm not accountable to anyone'; 'you know no-one and no-one knows you'; 'I just felt so alone and on my own when uni started. It is so impersonal and hard to know where to find help if needed'; 'you just know that you're simply not important to them'; and 'nothing prepares you for the loneliness and the lack of contact', Students participating in focus groups had largely overcome initial transition problems, and few reported feelings of isolation. These 'successful' students, however, confirmed that 'unsuccessful' ones had often been those who never connected with the institution and its learning environment or with their peers. Early experiences had confirmed their expectations of isolation and exacerbated their doubts about coping with the transition. Struggling for motivation, unsure if there was help let alone where to find it, they quietly slipped away. The fact that no one seemed to notice presumably cemented their alienation and confirmed their decision to leave.

The institutional significance of tackling isolation

In the absence of links between my data and records of enrolment and results, I cannot correlate the three experiences outlined above with decisions to persist and withdraw. In addition, these experiences are not simply a product of university teachers: difficulties in making and keeping friends, financial and transport problems, lack of motivation or interest in particular courses, and the often difficult adjustment to a more independent and responsible adult life all help produce isolation. Further statistical analysis is also required to explore the links between these different problems and identify those threads that characterise the 'isolated student', However, the combination of quantitative and qualitative responses does suggest that the quality of relationships with university teachers is a potentially important factor in successful transition, and may be even more important in unsuccessful transition. Moreover, effective contact goes beyond the more formal elements of lecture organisation, assessment guidance and clear statements of objectives to include enthusiasm, approachability, interest and, most especially, being known. If, to follow Mclnnis (1996, p. 553), 'the first step in improving the first year experience involves attending to the fundamentals of good teaching', those fundamentals include a commitment to welcoming, knowing and in some way connecting with each student early in their university experience.

Certainly, research in other universities in Australia and the United States supports the contention that faculty-student interaction is crucial to persistence and commitment (Gillespie and Noble 1992; Neumann *et al* 1990; Pascarella and Terenzini 1977; Stage 1989; Theophilides and Terenzini 1981). Pascarella and Terenzini (1980a, p. 72) note 'the particularly strong contributions of. . . interactions with faculty and the faculty concern for student development' to student integration, and found that these 'made greater estimated contributions... [than] students' peer relationships'. In another paper, the same authors (1980b, p. 277) describe 'the consistent relative importance of students' informal contacts with faculty members' in various models of persistence and withdrawal (see also Halpin 1990). These studies also suggest that some students — males, in particular, as well as relatively disadvantaged students — are especially likely to regard supportive and approachable teachers as an important ingredient in their persistence.

Of course, none of these studies would claim that increasing the quantity and the quality of teacher-student interaction works by itself: the great importance of social integration (Kantanis 1997) was also confirmed by the students in my study, 44% of whom nominated 'new people' and 'social life' as the most enjoyable aspects of university life in April. Relationships with parents and a network of other supporters are also crucial (Clulow and Brennan 1996). Indeed, it is likely that friendship groups and parental and family support are particularly important in Australian universities, because relatively few undergraduates live on-campus.

Transition and first-year experience programs must accordingly recognise the great importance of encouraging student interaction both inside and outside the formal teaching environment, the strong links between academic and social orientation and the importance of friendship networks for new students. This is even more important given students' strong reliance of students on peers in what becomes a collaborative comprehension and management of the first-year experience. It is also vital to ensure that accurate information and awareness of informal and formal support services are generalised throughout these peer networks. Particular faculties and institutions also need to address issues such as program

cohesion (Kantanis 1998), while the fostering of learning communities (Tinto 1995) and other institutional policies for promoting effective student interaction will also demand significant investments of time and energy (Mclnnis 1996).

Yet there are also specific challenges for institutions which stem from knowing that interaction with enthusiastic, approachable staff and some direct message of care and concern will almost certainly increase the likelihood of persistence (Tinto 1993). Every study suggests that student-to-student interaction will count for little if the student in transition finds no-one among the staff who cares enough to offer encouragement, answer questions, learn their name and treat her or him as an important person. It is therefore very important that the emphasis on peer interaction and learning communities does not ignore academic involvement, nor excuse university teachers and administrators from their responsibility to welcome, encourage, reassure, and guide each new cohort of undergraduates. This includes general strategies which will help the majority of students: effective orientation, good pre- and post-enrolment advice, a focus on academic adjustment in first semester, effective and student-focused teaching. But it also includes taking responsibility for those students — perhaps a fifth or even a quarter of each new cohort — for whom general strategies do not seem to be enough: those who do not make contact with supportive teachers and do not form connections and as a result experience significant isolation, disillusionment and disengagement.

Tackling expectations and experiences of isolation

In 1999, the Arts Faculty at the Clayton campus of Monash University initiated a series of strategies that aimed in part to increase early interaction between academic staff and students and develop an earlier and more effective identification of students experiencing academic difficulties. The Clayton faculty is very large and diverse: with over four thousand students, few common classes, and hundreds of subject offerings, it presents a particular challenge in terms of student integration and community building (Kantanis 1997, 1998).

These developing strategies were largely based on ideas and projects described in the research literature. Some had been trialled on other campuses or in other institutions or joined orientation and student mentoring schemes already in place in some of the Faculty's Schools. They included an attempt to more effectively meld academic and social orientation activities by involving senior students and student organisations in the former and lecturers and tutors in the latter; and changes to the faculty's major orientation event to provide more introductions to staff representatives and a more 'active welcome' to new students. In 2000, the Faculty will also trial a 'student drop-in centre', at which all students with questions and concerns can seek help from volunteer members of staff, and continue developing a range of other initiatives, including more orientation activities designed to foster staff-student interaction and a greater focus on the very important role played by sessional tutors in welcoming and embedding new students. Other ways of reaching students — such as web-based interaction or subject-based e-mail distribution lists and chat sites — are being developed across the university as a whole, while individual members of staff are also generating mentoring schemes and subject-based learning communities.

Perhaps the most interesting project, however, was an attempt to foster personal links between struggling students and members of academic staff. During July 1999, the Faculty's Student Progress Committee (SPC) reviewed the first-semester academic results of undergraduate students and contacted by letter all those who were at risk of breaching academic progress regulations. In all, 287 letters were sent out, 77 to first-year students and 210 to later-year students. The letters invited students to submit a written response explaining their poor academic performance and/or to request a meeting with the SPC, and also provided details of how and when to access course advice and support services. The following are the key results:

- 36 first year students (47% of those sent letters) and 38 later-year students (18%) sent in a written response;

- of the 74 students who responded, SPC members met 27 students, gave phone or e-mail advice or referral to course advisers to 16 others, and wrote letters of advice to the remaining 31;

- apart from students experiencing multiple problems such as illness, poverty and family conflict, the most commonly identified problems were isolation, lack of contact with teachers and a feeling of anonymity, not the distractions of social life;

- the most common requests from the students were for advice from course advisers and academic staff and academic mentoring by a lecturer, in other words, for direct human contact.

The letters received by the SPC provide some interesting insights on students' perceptions. A number of first-year students expressed gratitude for being approached: 'I knew I had a major problem but I didn't know who to go to or where to go' was typical. The letter was also successful in prodding some students to withdraw from the course or defer their enrolment, and some of these students were clearly grateful to be offered the opportunity of exit. 'What most impressed those involved in this trial, however, was the impact of personal contact — even in this potentially punitive form — on first-year students. The fact that someone was concerned about their progress, and that members of staff were willing to meet with and mentor them seemed to matter most of all. Essentially, somebody gave a damn.

The results of this process will need to be evaluated, and I am certainly not suggesting that it is the most effective way of identifying that group of 'dissatisfied' students who do not seem to benefit from more generalised orientation and adjustment strategies. For one thing, we need methods of identifying those students at risk of failure and demoralisation well before the end of first semester. Nor will these strategies necessarily prevent attrition; indeed, one of their better outcomes is the earlier identification of students who made poor choices or who are struggling with the academic demands of their course, for whom voluntary exit will hopefully lead to better options.

However, these initial results do suggest that increased staff-student contact (both formal and informal) can encourage commitment and persistence. For the majority of the students who participated in my research, enthusiastic and approachable teachers who managed to combine welcome and good communication had contributed to a successful adjustment. For those students experiencing failure and disillusionment, the offer of personal contact and assistance can also make a significant difference. Institutions should investigate ways of encouraging and mainstreaming staff involvement in the active welcoming and embedding of new students, and ways of building staff-student relationships that challenge and ameliorate expectations of isolation. This is clearly part of an approach to building what Macdonald and Gunn (1997) have called 'teaching communities' within academic departments, and demands attention to the recognition and reward of good teaching (Ramsden *et al* 1995). In addition, information about transition should focus more explicitly on the changed nature of teacher-learner relationships, the difficulties associated with learning how to be an independent learner in often large and impersonal institutions and the importance of making connections and seeking advice. Given the constraints of dependency under which teachers and students must often work in result-conscious secondary schools (Macdonald *et al* 1998), it is important that universities build these bridges and accept their responsibilities to develop independence, combat isolation, and do whatever they can to ensure that somebody does care.

As Mclnnis (1996) and others have noted, however, the prospects for real change in the first-year experience will be small if resources and rewards are pulled out of undergraduate and especially first-year teaching and if the fundamentals of good teaching — including, I would argue, pastoral care and a determination to welcome and support each student — are practiced only by those whose commitment to them exceeds the penalties which stem from what administrators have begun to call 'over-teaching'. It comes as no surprise to anyone with experience of undergraduate teaching and learning that higher staff-student ratios (Astin 1993), ineffective and poorly-designed teaching methods (Thomas 1989), large, impersonal teaching environments and staff who are too busy to care (Abbott-Chapman *et al* 1992) increase the chances of wasteful and damaging student attrition. But this common sense has apparently been lost among those making decisions about what really matters in higher education. The relatively small program to contact and connect with isolated students I have described has been successful, but it is not nearly enough. While it suggests confidence in our ability to do something, it also signals a much greater challenge for tertiary institutions. Only by recognising that challenge, and making the undergraduate student in general and the first-year student in particular the primary focus of institutional

investment and institutional concern, will it become easier to tell each new cohort of final-year secondary students that whatever they might have heard, somebody will care.

Endnote

The 26 schools involved in the study included state, independent and Catholic, single-sex and coeducational learning environments. Twenty were in Melbourne, three in the Latrobe Valley (an industrial region to the east of the metropolitan area), and three in Sale (a regional centre in Gippsland). The schools chosen were generally among the largest 'providers' of Monash students in 1994-5, but were also selected to represent different sectors, student groups and educational environments. During 1996, 915 Year 12 students from these schools completed a ten-page questionnaire, and 587 participated in focus groups. In addition, 37 students from seven metropolitan schools participated in videotaped interviews. I also conducted interviews with nearly two hundred VCE teachers and career coordinators in all twenty-six schools. During 1997, all of the 587 students who participated in the school-based focus groups were sent a twelve-page questionnaire in April and another eight-page questionnaire in October. They were also invited to attend focus groups in April and December. 224 students (38% of the cohort) returned one or both questionnaires; more than sixty students were involved in focus groups, and 19 of the 37 students from the 1996 videotaped interviews participated in a second round of videotaped sessions in 1997. These students were enrolled in nearly one hundred different courses and programs at thirty different universities and TAFEs, mostly in Melbourne. A small number of deferring or withdrawn students also returned a questionnaire. Further details of the research, including details of the participating schools, return rates, and some characteristics of the cohort, can be located at *http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/transition/mpfinrep.htm.*

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