

SCIENTIFIC AND PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE 'CRITICAL 90 DAYS' INITIATIVE AT UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT: The "Critical 90 Days" initiative, implemented in higher education institutions, serves as a structured adaptation strategy aimed at enhancing the academic, social, and psychological integration of students, particularly first-year students, into university life. This article explores the scientific and pedagogical foundations of the project, analyzing how systematic activities during the first 90 days of the academic year foster a supportive learning environment, increase student engagement, and promote holistic development. The study emphasizes the role of interdisciplinary collaboration, psychological support mechanisms, and targeted mentorship in achieving the objectives of the initiative. Practical recommendations are proposed to improve the effectiveness of the project across various university contexts.

Keywords: Critical 90 Days, student adaptation, higher education, pedagogical support, academic integration, psychological adjustment, mentoring, learning environment

INTRODUCTION

The transition from secondary education to university represents a critical turning point in a student's academic and personal development. During this period, students often encounter a range of challenges including academic workload, social adaptation, independence, and emotional adjustment. In response to these multifaceted demands, universities across the globe have begun to implement structured support systems aimed at easing this transition. One such approach is the "Critical 90 Days" initiative, designed to support students during the first three months of the academic year—a period widely regarded as decisive in shaping students' long-term engagement and success. This initiative is rooted in pedagogical and psychological theories emphasizing early intervention, active engagement, and the creation of a positive learning environment. By focusing on strategic orientation programs, academic advising, psychological support, and extracurricular involvement, the "Critical 90 Days" project aims to enhance students' sense of belonging, motivation, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, it seeks to establish strong student-teacher relationships and foster collaboration among academic and support units. This paper aims to examine the scientific and pedagogical principles that underpin the "Critical 90 Days" initiative, explore its implementation in university settings, and identify key factors that contribute to its effectiveness. The study also highlights the role of interdisciplinary teamwork and institutional commitment in ensuring sustainable impact and long-term student success.

1. Theoretical foundations

The "Critical 90 Days" initiative is grounded in a combination of educational psychology, developmental pedagogy, and student-centered learning models. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes the importance of guided support during the early stages of

learning, which aligns with the project's focus on early mentorship and structured guidance. Similarly, Maslow's hierarchy of needs underlines the necessity of creating a safe, inclusive, and motivating environment before cognitive engagement can fully occur. From a pedagogical perspective, the initiative draws on constructivist learning theories which prioritize active student participation, reflection, and peer collaboration. This is particularly crucial during the adaptation phase when students are forming academic habits, establishing peer networks, and developing personal learning strategies.

Implementation strategies

Effective execution of the "Critical 90 Days" project requires coordinated institutional effort and well-planned activities tailored to the needs of incoming students. Typical components include:

- **Orientation programs:** Introductory sessions that familiarize students with campus resources, faculty, rules, and expectations.
- **Academic skill workshops:** Sessions focused on time management, critical thinking, research skills, and exam preparation.
- **Peer mentoring and tutoring:** Pairing first-year students with experienced peers for academic and emotional support.
- **Social integration events:** Team-building exercises, clubs, and interest-based gatherings that foster friendship and communication.
- **Faculty engagement:** Encouraging professors to participate in early support activities such as informal meetings and progress monitoring.

These components, when delivered consistently and systematically, contribute to a smooth and meaningful transition into university life.

3. Pedagogical and psychological support mechanisms

The pedagogical dimension of the initiative emphasizes inclusive teaching, differentiated instruction, and the building of trust between students and instructors. Faculty members are encouraged to apply formative assessment practices and create feedback-rich environments. Psychological support is equally vital, especially during the initial months when students are most vulnerable to stress and anxiety. On-campus counseling services, mental health awareness campaigns, and one-on-one coaching sessions help students develop resilience and self-regulation skills. Additionally, frequent check-ins and emotional climate assessments provide valuable insights into student well-being and progress. These mechanisms work synergistically to improve retention rates, academic performance, and student satisfaction, thereby justifying the "Critical 90 Days" as a vital institutional investment.

CONCLUSION

The "Critical 90 Days" initiative represents a strategically designed framework aimed at fostering student adaptation, engagement, and academic success during the most sensitive period of university life. Rooted in robust pedagogical and psychological theories, the project emphasizes early intervention, holistic support, and collaborative implementation across institutional units. Through targeted orientation programs, academic and social support mechanisms, and inclusive teaching

practices, universities can significantly enhance students' transition into higher education. The initiative not only addresses academic readiness but also cultivates emotional resilience and a sense of belonging—factors crucial for long-term student retention and performance. To ensure its effectiveness, the “Critical 90 Days” project must be continuously assessed and adapted based on student feedback, contextual needs, and emerging educational trends. Ultimately, investing in students' first 90 days is not only a support strategy but a foundational pillar of student-centered higher education reform.

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