

Helping Students Facing Significant Challenges Stay in the College and Career Pipeline

Persistence in the college and career pipeline can be difficult to achieve when challenges arise in an individual's life. What can be done to help students overcome these barriers so they can achieve their academic and career goals?

Those helping adolescents and young adults with college and career decision-making should not feel that they must be personally able to meet the intervention or mental health support needs of each student. Knowledge to detect barriers to success and a system of referral is crucial to ensuring that students receive necessary support to meet life's serious challenges. Specifically, learn to identify "red flags" signaling challenges and understand what to *look for* in your interactions with students you are concerned about. Consult the ethical codes governing your profession, an ethical decision-making model, and your organization's policies to determine the course of action for you to take as an advisor to the student.

Examples of concerns requiring additional support:

- financial difficulties
- chronic illness
- depressive mental illnesses
- anxiety
- eating disorders
- addictions
- pregnancy and parenting
- the effects of poverty such as hunger and homelessness

Resources and places in the St. Louis region that can help students with these issues may be found on the St. Louis Graduates website, <http://www.stlouisgraduates.org>, under the Professional Development Resources section.

Sometimes, college-intending students lack support during the summer months. The term "summer melt," is a term used to describe the effect of the enrollment numbers shrinking as a result of student attrition from the pipeline during the summer months. In other words, summer melt is when a student intends to go to college and then doesn't enroll anywhere after high school graduation. Nationally, this average "melt rate" is between 10 percent and 20 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education, but it can be higher than 40 percent in certain areas of the country.

Multiple factors influence the rate of summer melt. Benjamin Castleman and Lindsay Page, two Harvard University researchers investigating the summer melt phenomenon, found that a financial aid gap, unfamiliarity with enrollment paperwork, family responsibilities and pressure from friends to stay home, can all contribute to a student's non-enrollment. After high school graduation, it can easily become unclear whether responsibility for seeing the process of enrollment through to completion lies with the student's high school or college. In some cases, community agencies may be positioned to help students through the transition and make sure that they enroll in college successfully.

In addition, postsecondary institutions may look to determine how to support students by creating a supportive campus environment. There are many dimensions of the “supportive environment.” Several associated with student persistence are noted below.

The excerpts below are taken from the article, “**Student satisfaction and persistence: Factors vital to student retention**,” by Jalynn Roberts, Ph.D. The University of Southern Mississippi and Ronald Styron, Jr., Ed.D. The University of Southern Mississippi.

The complete article may be found online at: <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/09321.pdf>

Academic Advising

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of a student’s interaction and engagement with an institution of higher learning is the relationship with his/her advisor. Academic advising should be a process in which faculty and staff interact with students as they develop, allowing and helping them realize what decisions should be made and subsequent actions taken to achieve their educational and career goals.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) purport that academic advising plays a role in students’ decisions to persist and also affects their chances of graduating. Many students who depart prematurely from college often state a poor academic advising experience, and one of the main components of any retention program is an excellent advising program (Tuttle, 2000).

Academic advising is much more than just scheduling courses and registering students for classes. Consequently, students take their relationships with their academic advisors very seriously, as they should. Furthermore, academic advising might possibly be, as Hunter and White (2004) suggest, the only organized and structured attempts in which university faculty or staff has sustained interactions with students.

When one considers the mentoring and counseling aspect of academic advising, it becomes obvious that helping students realize their purpose in higher education and why they are pursuing their current educational goals do not simply occur in one or two visits; hence, academic advising is a process that occurs over time with students building relationships with their advisors.

Williams, Glenn, and Wider (2008) elaborate on the benefits of these types of relationships stating, “This relationship can improve the student matriculation processes and provides students with a sense of security. The relationship also provides a sense of connectedness where students feel that they belong to the school and that the school belongs to them” (p. 1).

Social Connectedness

One important factor that affects college students’ persistence is that of being socially integrated and connected with others, especially other students. College, for most

students, is not only a time of academic pursuits, but also an opportunity to explore or enhance themselves as social beings.

Colleges should not present a barrier to this process. In fact, while some students desire to finish college, they do not consider themselves to be ultra-academic beings, and instead want to partake in endeavors that develop them socially (Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001).

While there is no doubt that the degree of social integration varies from student to student, Bean (2005) states, “Few would deny that the social lives of students in college and their exchanges with others inside and outside the institution are important in retention decisions” (p. 227).

Indeed, like most other challenges in life, a person is more likely to accomplish difficult tasks when he/she is in the company of others who are like-minded and facing similar challenges.

Since a major part of the college experience is how well the student adapts to unfamiliar surroundings and new people, the same holds true when a student attends college. In fact, Kuh and Love (2000) claim that social integration consists of students’ social and psychological comfort with their institutions’ surroundings, associations with common groups of students, and a sense of belonging to the institution. These factors provide security that is needed to help students bond with other students to achieve common goals, one of the most important being to persist until graduation.

Involvement and Engagement

Students feel marginalized when they believe they do not fit in, which leads to negative outcomes such as “self-consciousness, irritability, and depression” (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 27). This feeling of marginalization causes students to wonder if they matter. Addressing this issue is important to student retention as it is an antecedent to student involvement in college activities and programs (Schlossberg, 1989).

The most important step to becoming engaged and involved is for students to interact with their peers. According to Schlossberg, students interacting with their peers are a requirement that must occur in order to make participation in campus activities and student organizations meaningful. However, the most important interactions with peers seem to reinforce the academic learning that takes place in the classrooms, and then the benefits of those interactions permeate into other areas of college life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Whereas students must experience academic success to remain in college, it is also vital that they become involved and engaged in other areas of college life. Students who do not become socially integrated may or may not suffer from persistence issues, as it largely depends on the individual. Therefore, failing to become involved in campus activities, organizations, and extracurricular activities that promote involvement and integration of college life can lead to higher chances of attrition for some students.

Consequently, it is imperative for higher education administrators to work diligently to provide students with opportunities to get involved with campus organizations and activities (Tinto, 1993).

Faculty and Staff Approachability

Most scholars agree that the relationships between students and faculty are vital to student success in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005) and one of the principal aspects of facilitating these relationships includes faculty approachability.

Approachability involves faculty making themselves available and accessible both inside and outside class, especially at key junctures when students need them (Kuh et al., 2005).

Many schools and their faculty members attain adequate levels of approachability by keeping regular office hours and promptly answering students' emails. However, approachability also means that faculty are easily reached outside of class by doing things such as giving students their home phone and cell numbers, personal email addresses, etc.

Furthermore, Kuh et al. contend that faculty approachability and interaction can consist of many facets, including working with a faculty member on a research project, working with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, program activities, etc.), discussing assignments and grades, and receiving prompt academic feedback on performance. In short, the more contact a student has with a faculty member, the better chance he/she has in persisting until graduation (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Business Procedures

Another factor that impacts persistence is what is known as business procedures or bureaucratic factors. It can best be defined as the interaction that occurs between the student and the service providers at the institution (Bean, 2005).

For instance, common patterns of exchanges occur between the student and various offices such as the business office, residence life, financial aid, departmental offices that define major requirements, social/athletic events, parking management, etc. Usually, students bring the appropriate forms and/or money and exchange them for access to resources and services. However, many students become discouraged when they perceive bureaucracy as more important to college staff than student service.

As Bean (2005) asserts, "The bureaucratic aspects of the academy are soulless, deadening students whose spirits should be lifted by their academic experiences" (p. 230). Students can become equally disenfranchised with an institution when they feel they have been given the run-around or misled. All of these types of unhelpful experiences cause students to develop negative attitudes toward their institutions and, thus, make them less likely to graduate from those institutions (Bean, 2005).

Learning Experiences

One of the most important missions for institutions of higher learning is to provide meaningful learning experiences for their students. These learning experiences are determined by the collective effort of faculty, staff and students.

At the same time, students enter higher education with their own expectations of learning experiences. These expectations impact how students respond to their environments and also act as precursors as students make academic decisions, such as choice of major (Pike, 2006).

Expectations can also influence how students respond to their academic surroundings and impact their decisions of whether or not to remain in certain fields of study, or college in general (Bosch, Hester, MacEntee, MacKenzie, Morey & Nichols, 2008; Kuh, Gonyea & Williams, 2005; Pike, 2006).

Meaningful learning experiences are an essential key to student retention, and it is imperative for institutions of higher learning to create valuable and enriching learning experiences within their academic programs. Such experiences are also necessary to produce an economically independent enlightened citizenry who possesses civic responsibility. When meaningful learning experiences are missing from the curriculum, students often become disengaged and dissatisfied because they see no relevance in what they are learning. Moreover, students with few chances to participate in meaningful learning experiences are denied the opportunity to integrate and apply the knowledge they have obtained in their classes (Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J., Whitt, E., Andreas, R., Lyons, J., Strange, C., et al. (1991); Kuh et al., 2005; Moxley et al, 2001).

Student Support Services

A number of colleges and universities offer students a wide variety of services and resources intended to promote persistence by providing academic assistance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Both Miller (2005) and Seidman (2005b) contend that if students are admitted to a college, then they should have expectations for that college to provide services that will help them succeed.

It is important for institutions of higher learning to implement and maintain various academic resources that promote student success and increase student persistence because these resources are needed by a significant number of students who are not adequately prepared for the academic challenges they will face at the university.

Schools that truly desire to increase student persistence should implement and advocate the usage of “responsive, learner-centered support services, such as peer tutoring and special labs for writing and mathematics” (Kuh et al., 2005).

Most of the academic support services are tutoring centers that offer academic assistance in a variety of areas, such as speaking, writing, and mathematics. Usually, students are able to schedule appointments with the centers, discuss the academic challenges they experience, and the staff at these centers is able to provide assistance to them. Adelman (1999) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported that academic

resources such as these produced statistically significant positive impacts on student persistence.

Many students who endeavor to earn a college degree fail to persist until graduation. Although institutions have responded to student retention issues by implementing programs and services, retention rates have not improved (Seidman, 2005a). The typical six-year graduation rate for most public institutions in the United States ranges between 50 and 56 percent (Berkner, He & Cataldi, 2002; Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008; Mortenson, 2005). Low retention rates not only impact students and institutions that must bear the economic burden connected to premature departures, but also the ability of a nation to “compete in a global economy” (Friedman, 2005; Seidman, p. xi, 2005a). Now more than ever, higher education administrators must be cognizant of the reasons why students depart from institutions of higher learning prematurely and what can be done to help students overcome these barriers so they can achieve their academic and career goals. Additional research is required to determine strategies to address this issue (Tinto, 2005).

Sources

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