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Factors Related to the Persistence of First Year College Students at Four-Year Colleges and Universities: A Paradigm Shift.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities have been challenged during the last decade to improve retention rates of first year students. Particularly for private institutions, a low retention rate hits the budget at the bottom line. The characteristics of first year students have evolved over the past 20 years. Students are more inclined to change colleges or universities several times during their collegiate experience. The most critical time for a student to first decide to change institutions is during their first year. “One-third of each year’s full-time freshmen are not at the same institution one year later” (Levitz & Noel, 1990, p. 65). Therefore, more emphasis has been placed on enhancing first year student persistence at institutions of higher education. Student persistence depends on several factors including their involvement on campus, their connection to the campus environment and their ability to succeed. As a result, both academic and student affairs administrators at colleges and universities struggle with three primary issues: developing effective first year programs that will enhance the persistence of first year students, enhancing student involvement in campus life, and changing a campus environment to encourage partnership with academic & student affairs in focusing on first year student success. “If students make it through that first year successfully, the chances that they will persist improve considerably” (Levitz & Noel, 1990, p. 65).

Definition of Terms

College Cost

The National Center for Education Statistics, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education defines college costs as tuition, fees, room and board. All other institutional costs are considered non-tuition related expenses.

Expected Family Income (EFC)

The federal government expects that students and their families will contribute to the cost of the student's college education to the extent that they are able. The United States Congress has therefore approved a "methodolgy" that colleges and universities ulitize to calcuate a student's EFC. This amount is adjusted against the overall expected college cost and therefore determine students eligiblity for federal and/or state financial aid.

First Year Seminar

A institutional program focused on assisting firs year students with transition and adjustment to the campus environment.

Student Involvement

Astin (1993) defines an involved student as "one who devotes considerable energy to academics, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations and activities, and interacts often with faculty".

Student Persistence

For the purpose of this paper, student persistence is defined as the continual pursue of a student in a degree program leading toward the completion of the program and therefore being awarded a college degree in the student's field of study. Persistence and Retention are concepts that are used interchangeably.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There has been increasing researched focusing on student retention and persistence at colleges and universities, especially first year students. De Luca, Mallory & Woodard indicates that this increase in research was initially driven by declines in student enrollment as well as an "external push for institutional accountability" (p. 55). However, there exist a sincere desire among college and university officials to determine that factors related to student retention and persistence at institutions of higher education.

Levitz & Noel (1989) believes that "fostering student success in the freshman year is the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence" (p.65). First year students must view opportunities within the institution that will afford them the desire to continue at the institution. "If students make it through the first year successfully, the chances that they will persist improve considerably" (p. 65). Student persistence begins once a student is admitted to the institution. Perigo & Upcraft (1990) sites that a primary activity that institutions use to assist students is transitioning and adjusting to the college environment is through orientation programs. Orientation programs enhanced students' abilities to be successful by providing them with the necessary academic and social tools to begin their collegiate journey. However, for years orientation programs have been the only "real" event where first year

students were provided with collective institutional support. Institutions now realize that students need academic and personal support during their entire college experience, especially during their first year. The focus must now shift from just having orientation programs to creating first year programs that will enhance student persistence to remain in college and succeed.

First Year Program

Gardner & Upcraft (1990) believes that one of the best programs for enhancing first year student persistence is through the first year seminar. They suggests nine factors that must be included in the curriculum of first year seminars to enhance student persistence: “(1) opportunity for interaction with faculty outside the classroom, (2) encourage use of student support services, (3) provide information on campus activities, clubs and organizations, (4) provide a comprehensive introduction to using the library, (5) encourage writing, (6) teach proper study skills, (7) provide career exploration, (8) focus on issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, sexuality, anxiety management, and wellness” (p. 208). Lets review these nine factors in more detail.

In 2000, The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition distributed a national survey of first-year seminar programming in American higher education to Chief Academic Officers at all regionally accredited colleges and universities with a student population of 150 or more (N = 2,539). The purpose of the survey was to gain a more accurate understanding of current first-year seminar practices. 1013 institutions (40% of survey population) responded to the survey. 749 institutions (74% of respondents) reported that they offer a special course for first-year students called a first-year seminar, colloquium or student success course. 465 respondents (62%) indicated that their campus offers an extended orientation or college survival seminar. These courses offer a blend of topics essential for student success.

125 respondents (17%) indicated that their campus offers an academic seminar for which content is fairly uniform across sections. 96 respondents (13%) indicated that their campus offers academic seminars for which the content is determined by the instructor and is different for each section. The remaining 63 seminars (9%) were categorized as basic study skills courses, professional seminars (taught within undergraduate professional schools) or "other."

In the survey, the majority of respondents identified three consistent primary course objectives of their first-year seminar: develop essential academic skills, ease the transition and adjustment of students to the college environment, and provide an orientation to campus resources and facilities. Respondents also identified five of the most important course topics for first-year seminars that had common content across sections. The five most frequently mentioned topics were: (1) academic skills, (2) time management, (3) personal development/self-awareness, (4) transition to college, and (5) career exploration. The results indicated that a successful first year seminar must ensure that students are involved and connected to the institution. This connection and involvement will ease the transition and adjustment of first year students to the college environment.

Student Involvement

Astin (1993) believes that student involvement is an essential element in connecting students to the campus environment. He states that there are five factors related to student involvement: (1) academic involvement, (2) involvement with faculty, (3) involvement with student peers, (4) involvement with work, (5) other forms of involvement.

First, academic involvement refers to student attendance in classes or labs, studying or doing homework, and using a personal computer for academic reasons. Second, involvement with faculty focuses on student interaction with faculty beyond the classroom environment such as talking with faculty outside of the classroom, being a guest in a professor's home, work on a

research project with a professor, or assist a faculty member with facilitating a class. Astin (1993) believe that faculty assists students in understanding the purpose and foundation of a liberal arts education. Third, involvement with student peers centers around students' socialization with friends, participating in student organizations, being elected to a student office, or participating in an intercollegiate sport. Fourth, most students are involved in work. Involvement with work depends on full time or part time work, on or off campus work, and the number of hours spent working per week. The final point of involvement is other forms of involvement, which includes exercising, reading for pleasure, volunteer work, watching television or other related hobbies.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement focuses around the notion that students learn more and is more connected when they are involved in the academic and social aspects of the college experience. The more opportunities for student involvement the more likely students will persist. Therefore, interaction with faculty, student peers, academic initiatives within and beyond the classroom environment are key to students having a positive image of the university and will reflect the institutional commitment to student success, which is necessary for student persistence.

Astin (1984, 1993) further explain that true involvement requires the investment of time in academics, building relationships and participating in activities related to the campus. This investment will ultimately depend on the student's interest and goals. "The most important institutional resource, therefore, is student time: the extent to which students can be involved in the educational development is tempered by how involved they are with family friends, jobs, and other outside activities" (Astin, 1984). Both the concepts of a first year seminar and developing opportunities for student involvement are important to the retention and persistence of first year students.

While Gardner & Upcraft (1990) and Astin (1993) raises some interesting perspectives, the key to the success creating an effective first year seminar for enhancing student persistence and increasing opportunities student involvement is through academic and student affairs. . In order to develop effective first year programs that will enhance the persistence of first year students and enhance student involvement in campus life there must be a change in the campus environment to encourage partnership with academic & student affairs in focusing on first year student success.

Fostering Collaboration

As a result of enhancing orientation programs to first year programs, there is a strong effort to encourage academic and student affairs to work collaboratively in developing these programs. The National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), in its list of Good Practices for Student Affairs encourages forging educational partnerships that advance student learning. NASPA (2003) states that, "...partners for learning include students, faculty, academic administrators, staff, and others inside and outside the institution." While this sounds like a great idea, there are several factors that must be considered in building collaboration between academic and student affairs to create programs geared toward the retention of first year students.

First, clear expectations and roles of academic affairs and student affairs in this partnership must be developed. Lack of clear roles leads to inventing a fifth wheel for a vehicle that only needs four and already has a spare. An effective way to develop clear roles is build a guiding team as suggested by Kotter and Cohen (2002). They suggest "building a guiding team with the right people with appropriate skills, the leadership capacity, and the organizational credibility and connections" will be a powerful tool in developing clear expectations and roles.

There must also be a good working relationship between the Chief Academic Officer and the Chief Student Affairs Officer who will provide administrative leadership to this collaboration.

Second, additional responsibilities that collaboration will place on both academic and student affairs personnel beyond traditional roles such as academic instruction and maintaining campus culture must be addressed. With downsizing and limited financial resources, both departments are stretched in providing current programs and services. Defining roles and expectations will be helpful in determining responsibilities of both departments in this collaborative effort. Retaining students should be a shared responsibility.

Third, there must be a set of common beliefs about the most effective ways to retain students and engage them in the campus culture. While there should be some autonomy in specific programming efforts, there must exist common themes that guide the collaborative initiatives in obtaining the desired results, student retention. These common beliefs must express common language, common pedagogies, and common outcomes. The common set of beliefs should focus on developing and implementing a curriculum and co-curriculum model for first year programs that enhances student retention and persistence. This model may serve a dual purpose by first engaging students in programs that connect them to the campus thus retaining them and secondly increasing student enrollment by attracting new students to the institution.

Finally, there is a history of academic and student affairs as two separate distinct departments. This history will definitely lead to some resistance to the “status quo”. In *Managing Transitions*, Bridges (2003) discusses that transitions within organizations occur in three phases: “letting go of the old ways and the old identity, the neutral zone, and the new beginning”(p.4). Both academic and student affairs have to reevaluate their “old ways” and “old identity” in order to move to realigning and refocusing on new ways and a new identity that will

lead to new beginnings in a new partnership. The collaborative process will definitely raise transitional issues for both departments as well as the university community.

Student Affairs has long played a complimentary role with academic affairs in promoting the mission of its college or university. The idea of working together to increase student retention and persistence seems new and innovative however the very essence of student affairs was created to support student success both academically and socially.

Both academic and student affairs are independently effective in engaging students in first year programs. The time has arrived to combine resources to engage first year students by merging curriculum and co-curriculum programs thus increasing faculty/student interaction, student involvement in the campus community, and stronger institutional commitment to student success. Collaboration between academic and student affairs will have a positive impact on engaging first students in meaningful programs. As a result, students will be more engaged in the campus environment that will ultimately increase retention rates, student persistence, student enrollment, and hopefully provide for additional financial resources. Developing a collaborative first year program can be very challenging. Even though there exists over 200 colleges and universities with successful first year seminars, retention rates increased slightly. This gives the notion that another phenomenon influences the persistence of first year students.

A Paradigm Shift

There are two crucial factors related to student persistence that supersedes all factors mentioned before: (1) academic preparation and (2) a student's ability to pay for college. Lets first deal with the latter of the two crucial factors. A student's ability to pay is defined as "a student and his or her family's ability to afford the student's choice of college or the student's college experience" (DeLuca, Mallory & Woodard, 2001, p. 62). Tinto (1987, p. 65) believes that much of the impact of the ability to pay for college on student persistence occurs before or at

the point of entry into a college or university. He believes that this is a complex issue and little is known about how and why personal finances affect student persistence.

Recently, The United States House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee approved a bill that keeps the Pell Grant maximum award at \$4,050 for the 2004-2005 academic year. With the growing cost to attend colleges are on the rise, a student's ability to pay for college is diminishing. An electronic survey done by the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (2004) asked student affair professional to indicate whether there was a tuition crisis on their respective campuses. Of 206 student affairs professionals that responded to the electronic survey, 81% indicated that there was indeed a tuition crisis on their campus.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2001 college costs (tuition, room, and board) have risen at both public and private institutions. In 2001 the annual college cost was estimated to be \$8,046 at public colleges and \$22,520 at private colleges. Over the last decade, college costs at public and private colleges has risen 21 percent and 26 percent respectfully, after adjustment for inflation. As a result of these rising cost, the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) has increased and more students are seeking governmental financial assistance.

The NCES reports that 30 percent of average undergraduate students enrolled full-time for the full year at a college or university receives a federal Pell grant, averaging \$2,314. Nearly one of every four undergraduates (23 percent) received a federally subsidized Stafford loan, averaging about \$3,214. Among full-time, full-year undergraduates, about 56 percent of students enrolled full-time at public 4-year institutions, and 67 percent of students enrolled full-time at private 4-year institutions received some form of Title IV financial aid.

Percentages of undergraduates receiving federal aid varied depending on family income and type of institution. Among dependent students, percentages receiving federal aid ranged

from 70 percent of undergraduates from families with incomes of less than \$20,000 to about 25 percent of undergraduates from families with incomes of \$100,000 or more. Among independent students, 66 percent of those with incomes less than \$10,000 received some federal financial aid.

Therefore with escalating costs of a college education, coupled with the diminishing availability of federal and state financial assistance programs, college students are finding it increasingly more challenging to obtain financial assistance (Lau, 2003). Students often have to seek out of forms of funding such as part-time jobs in order to put themselves through school. In the end you have students who are so exhausted from working twenty to thirty hours a week that they just do not have the energy or the desire to attend classes or to study (Lau, 2003). With the lack of attentive to classes and study, students often find themselves in a difficult academic dilemma by the end of the semester.

A student's academic preparation to survive within a college or university environment is crucial to student persistence and success. However, students' academic abilities are often misinterpreted on a college admission application with either a good high school grade point average and/or a high composite score on the SAT or ACT. While studies have shown a direct correlation between academic success and high school grade point average, consideration must be given to a student's ability to function within a higher education environment. Lau (2003) states that many students leave colleges and universities because institutions failed to create an environment, within and beyond the classroom that is conducive to the student's learning and educational needs.

Students who have good high school grade point averages and in most cases high aptitude test scores still have difficulties managing normal college work. On the other hand, there are students who lack the basic and fundamental skills, especially in mathematics and writing, who find it difficult to cope with the normal college course workload (Lau 2003). Students often do

not have the proper prerequisite requirements to take various college level courses, especially in upper level courses.

IMPLICATIONS:

Gardner, Upcraft, and Astin all bring valid points to the table concerning student retention and persistence at colleges and universities. All three authors concur that there needs to be an institutional commitment to increasing student success. However, Tinto (1987) believes that persistence is a function that exists within the parameters of a student's motivation and academic ability and the institutional response to those parameters. The greater the institutional commitment to retaining the student, the more likelihood that the student will persistence and will graduate. He also sites that financial considerations must be taken into account in addressing factors related to student persistence.

Regardless of the institutional commitment if a student does not have the ability to pay for a college education or the academic preparation to be successful the student will not persist. The notion of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs gives credence to this phenomenon where a college student's great needs before any thing else can be factored is financial security and academic preparation. As a result there are several implications:

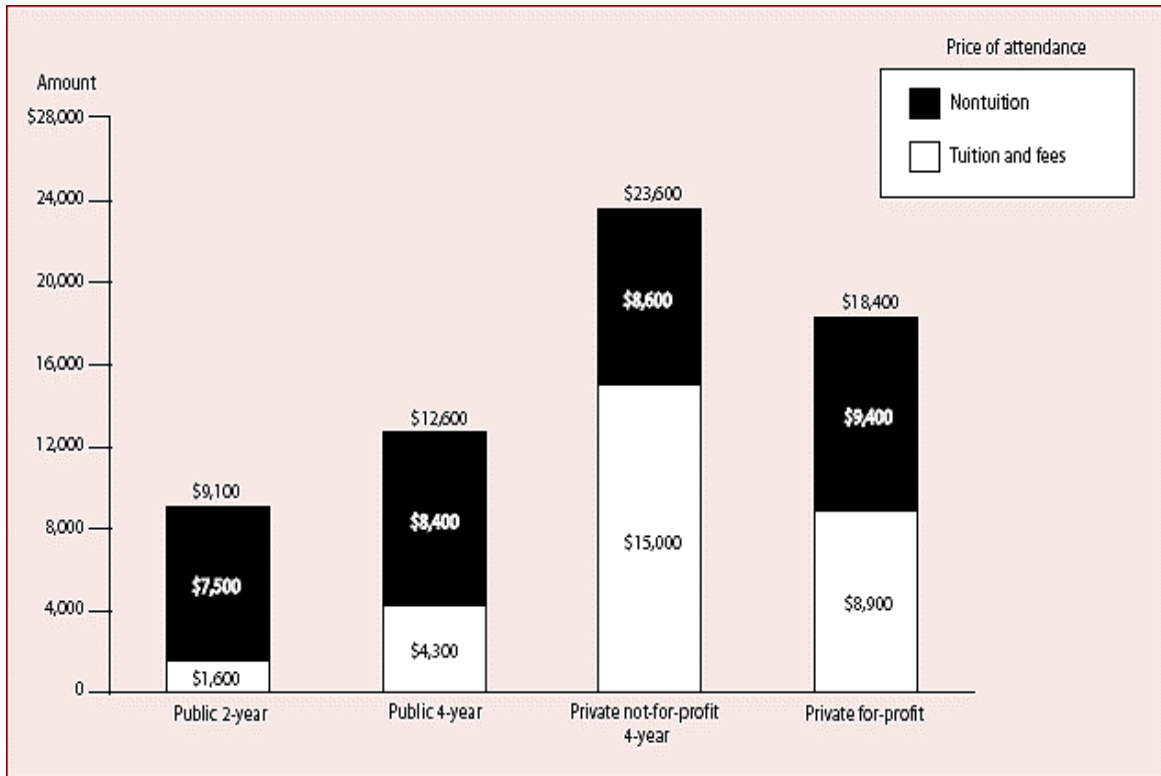
First, colleges and universities must work diligently with first year students to provide them with a financial aid analysis of college costs for their first two years in college. This can be package as an estimated financial aid analysis considering that the EFC remains constant and a modest increase in college cost. Second, first year students should be given a performance measurement before registering for classes to identity academic needs and academic support resources. Students should be provided with a personalized "academic map" that can be

incorporated into the first year seminar that can use as a guide to their persistence and academic success. Finally, institutions should create and implement comprehensive workshops designed to educate first year seminar faculty about the factors related to the persistence of first year student and who to utilize those factors in developing a classroom curriculum.

In conclusion, student persistence continues to be a growing issue in higher education. At the turn of the century, the number of students. College administrators must begin to address these issues with due diligence before this becomes a national crisis that will reshape higher education funding in the private and public sectors. When viewed as “customers”, students should be provided with the necessary tools to be successful in the college or university environment of their choice. Therefore, student persistence becomes a shared responsibility creating and implementing new first year programs, enhancing opportunities for student involvement, and forging new partnerships between academic and student affairs.

APPENDIX ONE

Table One



Non-tuition expenses are based on institutional student budget estimates and include room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and personal expenses while enrolled. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

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