A Web of Ways: Navigating the Myriad of Perspectives on Student Persistence and Institutional Retention in Postsecondary Education

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Overview

- Importance of Student Retention

- Understanding the Language

- Key Theoretical Perspectives

  - Future Developments in Student Retention Theory

- Factors Impacting a Student's Decision to Leave

- Impact of Admissions & Recruitment Policies

- Impact of Finances

- Retention Strategies & Learning Communities

- Leadership & Communications in Student Retention Strategies

- Government Interest in Student Retention

Importance of Student Retention

- Retention looks at the ability to keep students from one year to the next with the ultimate goal of degree completion
- Student retention involves a matrix of issues
  - Institution-related
  - Student-related
- Student retention is a component of enrolment management
  - Enrolment management is important for all years levels in post-secondary education

Importance of Student Retention: Institutional Perspective

- Funding stability
  - Low retention rates negatively impact an institutions budget due to lost revenue (services, tuition, residence etc..)

- Institutional reputation
  - Low retention rates can negatively impact the institution's reputation

- Alumni relations: fewer graduates = fewer alumni = reduced number of prospective future donors

- Government relations
  - Funding transfers
  - Accountability: with governments and taxpayers

- Better understanding of the student body can lead to improved projecting of enrolment patters and overall improvements to enrolment management

Importance of Student Retention: Student Perspective

- Better use of a student's time
  - Students who withdraw cannot regain time spent in class that could have been spent working or pursuing other interests
- Fees paid (tuition, books, residence, etc…) are looked at as an investment, not wasted money
- Students cannot regain tuition fees paid, in most cases, which can increase a student's debt level
- Potential for higher income levels upon graduation which can result in a higher socio-economic status and increased contribution to the economic development of the country

Understanding the Language

Language used in student retention can have significant impacts on the meaning, focus and outcomes of a study. It is important to have clear definition as to what is being studied as a number of words are interchangeably, sometimes incorrectly

- Persistence: a student's ability or motivation to achieve his/her own academic goals
  - focuses on the student

- Retention: an institution's ability to keep students from one year to the next
  - focuses on the institution

More Language

- Voluntary withdrawal (voluntary drop-out): a student who decides to leave their studies

- Involuntary withdrawal (or involuntary drop-out): a student who is required to withdraw due to poor academic performance

- Institutional retention: The ability to retain students within a particular college or university

- System retention: the ability to retain students within the broader spectrum of postsecondary education

- Stop-outs: students who voluntarily withdraw for a period of time, then return at a later date to continue their studies

Theoretical Models of Student Retention

- **Sociological Perspective**
  - Student integration model (Tinto)
- **Psychological Perspective**
  - Psychological model of college student retention (Bean & Eaton)
  - Student involvement theory (Astin)
- **Economic Perspective**
  - Human Capital Theory
- **Organizational Perspective**
  - Student attrition model (Bean)
- **Combined Sociological/Organizational Perspective**
  - Integrated model of student retention (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda)

Psychological Models

- Psychological model of college student retention (Bean & Eaton): student-focused model

- Student involvement theory (Astin): increased student involvement has a positive effect on a student's decision to persist.

Sociological Model

- **Spady's Model** (Spady): coined the phrase "academic suicide"
- **Student integration model** (Tinto):
  - Institution-focused model
  - Explores the integration of academic and social systems within a postsecondary institution
  - Student retention can be improved by increasing a student's level of commitment to the institution
  - Identified different categories of students who withdraw (voluntary, involuntary, transfer students, system withdrawals)

Organizational Models

- Look at organizational structures and the variables within that can influence a student's decision to stay or to leave their studies
- Student attrition model (Bean):
  - Relationship between employee turnover in human resource management and student attrition in postsecondary education
  - Found similarities between student retention and employee turnover
  - Added new variables that impact student attrition: gender and external factors

Sociological/Organizational Models

- Integrated model of student retention (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda): combines both sociological (Tinto) and organizational (Bean) perspectives

- Found that the two theories were complimentary to each other

- Provided a more thorough understanding of "individual, environmental and institutional factors on persistence"

Source: Cabrera et al., 1993, p. 135

Economic Models

- Human capital theory

- Focus on the cost benefit of attending postsecondary education

- If the cost of pursuing postsecondary studies exceeds the perceived financial benefit of obtaining postsecondary credentials, students would be more likely to drop-out

Future Theoretical Perspectives

- Formula for student retention (Seidman): focuses on early identification of at-risk students and the application of intervention strategies for these students
  - Student-focused model
- Geometric model of student persistence (Swail): focuses on factors that have the most impact on student retention (financial aid, admissions, academic services, curriculum and instruction, and student services)
  - Institution-focused model
- Challenges with new models

Factors that Impact Student Retention

- Individual factors:
  - Academic ability
  - Problem solving and decision making abilities
  - Ability to interact effectively with other members of the institutions community (social connections)
  - Family background
  - Student's commitment to the institution and themselves

Factors that Impact Student Retention

- Institutional factors:
    - Support services
    - Availability of financial aid
    - Institutional fit
    - Availability of extra-curricular activities
    - Academic advising
    - Accessible faculty members
    - Campus size
    - Facilities
    - Social climate of the institution

Admissions & Recruitment

- Recruitment strategies and communication tools establish a student's image/expectations of the institution, social and academic aspects

- Admission policies and procedures can be used to determine a students likelihood to be retained such as:
  - high school admission averages results in higher levels of student persistence
  - personal statements that high leadership qualities

- Research on the impact of standardized testing in determining student persistence remains inconclusive

- Admissions policies and procedures, more than student recruitment, can have an impact on student retention

Admissions & Recruitment Challenges

- Level of institutional supply and demand affects enrolment management, and therefore impacts admissions and recruitment policies
    - The greater the demand, the greater the institution's ability to have more selective admission processes
    - Not all institutions can be highly selective and meet enrolment goals
    - Definition of being selective

- Three fundamental questions institutions can consider when looking at student retention from an admission's perspective:
    - Does the institution want to be considered highly selective or have more open admission policies?
    - Does the institution want to focus on admitting students that have the greatest potential to succeed or on encouraging students to reach their greatest potential?
    - Is the institution willing to support students once they are enrolled to ensure they reach their potential?

Finances

- Funding sources, aid eligibility, and socioeconomic background all play a role in the funding matrix

- One of the greatest challenges with respect to postsecondary funding is student awareness of the various funding opportunities available for their particular situation

- There is a difference between types of funding available (loans, grants, awards) and a student's level unmet need with respect to student retention

- There is a connection between the student experience and financial tolerance levels
  - the amount of debt a student is willing to carry based on the level of importance a student places on his/her education

- The decision to withdraw is a process, finances enter the equation at some point in the decision timeline, the point of entry is unclear

Finance Challenges

- The challenge with studies targeting postsecondary financing is their multiple foci and the number of elements involved in postsecondary financing

- Financial studies have a number of limitations:
    - Length of the study (five or seven years) limits the results
    - Sample selection and requirements
    - Variables known to impact retention are typically excluded which can impact the results

Retention Strategies

- Orientation programs
- Study skills programs:
  - University101
  - First Year Experience
- Academic tutoring or advising
- Peer mentoring
- Learning Communities

Retention Strategies: considerations

- Mandatory vs. optional programs
  - Optional Program challenges
    - compliance, especially at non-residential institutions
    - low participation rates can negatively impact the overall objectives of the program
  - Mandatory programs:
    - Proactive approach
    - automatically enroll students in a program and have pre-determined advisors

- Targeted programs for specific cohorts: at-risk students

Learning Communities

- Group students together to complete defined activities together to enable students to integrate academically and socially with peers who have similar academic interests
- Four types of learning communities have been identified
  - Curricular
  - Classroom
  - Residential
  - student-focused
- Academic-based learning communities (curricular and classroom) can be applied to:
  - a particular course
  - a grouping of courses or faculty members
  - Residence-focused learning communities

Learning Communities Interest

There is increased interest in learning communities as they:

- organize students and faculty into smaller groups
- encourage curriculum integration
- help students establish support networks
- provide social settings for students
- focus faculty and students on learning outcomes
- provide a structured setting for the delivery of academic support programs

Leadership & Communication

- An important component for developing and implementing a retention strategy

- Leaders who exhibit several leadership styles are better able to adapt to different situations or environments

- Organizational communication is the cornerstone of a successful organization

  - Ensures members are aware of their roles and responsibilities

  - Creates a supportive environment, professionally and personally, for employees

Communication: Meaning-Centred Approach

- Meaning-centred approach to communication:
  - Key is to understand what communication is
  - focuses on organizing information to reduce message equivocality
  - Decision making: ensures resources are in place to meet organizational goals
  - Influences interactions between the organization and the individual to produce desired behaviour
  - Understanding of the culture (traditions) within an organization

Retention and the Meaning-Centred Approach

- Implementing/changing a retention strategy is a culture change
  - Requires staff and departments to look at student-faculty-institution interactions differently
  - Requires modification of interactions to ensure student's achieve success
- Institutional leadership responsible for ensuring community members are aware of:
  - The retention strategy
  - The purpose
  - The goals
  - Their roles and responsibilities

How the Meaning-Centre Approach Can Help

- Meaning-centred approach can:
  - Help organize information to create a circular process where information loops between the groups implementing the change and those affected by the change
  - This will reduce message equivocality, ensuring the meaning of the communication and the institution's goals are understood
  - Provides community members an avenue to provide feedback

Government Interests: Provincial

- Interest from both the Canadian federal and provincial governments.
- Provincial Interest (Ontario): focused on institutional accountability
    1. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): three measures both colleges and universities report on annually:
        - Employment rates
        - Government student loan default rates
        - Graduation rates
    2. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act
        - Multi-Year Accountability Agreements
        - Commitment to quality and accessibility.
- Are KPIs adequate measures of institutional success?

Government Interest: Federal

- Focused on a student's ability to finance his/her education and student mobility
- Challenges:
  - Lack of a national student information system, therefore no ability to track students throughout the Canadian postsecondary system
  - postsecondary education is a provincial responsibility
- Initiatives:
  - Postsecondary Student Information System project (PSIS): tacking system to assess student mobility, completion rates and needs of the Canadian postsecondary market
- Is there a need for a federal department/ministry for education?

Findings

- There is a divide in the approaches used to understand the relationship between a student-focused approach and an institution-focused approach to student retention:
    1. Focus on student persistence and the characteristics persisters are most likely to exhibit
    2. Focus on student retention and the characteristics institutions should look for or improve to increase their ability to retain students

- It would be difficult for an institution to focus solely on predicting which students would be most likely to persist
    - Impact on students who are considered late 'academic bloomers'

- Prediction models would be helpful to identify students that can be considered 'at-risk'

Conclusion

- Implementing retention strategies requires an understanding of:
  - Student characteristics
  - The reasons students leave (knowing the problem)
  - What works and what doesn't at a specific institution
- Institutions cannot focus on one aspect alone. One 'super-characteristic' does not exist that identifies who will persist and who will not
- Retention planning requires strong leadership and clear communication with all areas involved
- Retention planning is very individual to the specific characteristics of an institution and should focus on the institution's mandate, enrolment goals and financial commitment to student retention
- Retention programs need to be monitored and measured to determine effectiveness and their level of success

Where to start: seven questions to assist with developing a retention strategy

- Understand the nature of the problem
- Know why your student leave
- Know what is being done at the institution already to address retention issues
- Know the effectiveness of these programs
- Know what programs and strategies may be worth considering
- Provide evidence that there exists significant support on campus to do something about this issue
- Understand the institutional change process

Source: Bean, 1980