Common Ground: Addressing Attrition
Across Diverse Institutions in Higher Education

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Abstract: Student attrition is an ongoing concern in American higher education, where institutions are being increasingly held accountable for the success of the students they admit. While differences across diverse institutions exist, research suggests that there are many similarities regarding issues related to student persistence and success. In fact, this common ground presents an opportunity for common solutions. The variety of higher education institutions utilizing knowledge gained through institutional initiatives continues to identify new, better ways of serving students. This essay sheds light on the known differences between institution types while recognizing the common goals of improving student persistence. The essay further supports the need for additional research in this area to fully understand how the higher education community can best prepare and support students of all types, from all institutions, to reach their educational goals.

Keywords: Student progress, retention, college dropout, attrition, higher education, student progress, persistence

Introduction

Student progress and retention are of utmost importance to institutions of higher education. Not only is an institution's reputation inherently tied to the success of its students; there are many financial implications tied to the progress and graduation of those who are recruited and ultimately enroll in their programs. With a lack of substantial improvement in attrition over the last several years and national concern about graduation rates (The White House, n.d.), a wealth of research has been conducted to further understand the factors that affect a student's likelihood of persisting from the start of one's program through the end.

Certainly, most researchers of higher education recognize student attrition as a metric to focus on and improve, but some educators downplay the negative consequences to students who fail to persist, arguing the net gain of acquisition of knowledge, experience with higher education, and personal growth. Others strongly oppose that sentiment and assert that "[l]eaving college without a degree is in most every case not a gain but a failure of the school and student" (Raisman, 2013, p. 8). Research has found that between 2001 and 2009, more

students borrowed money for college, and more of these borrowers are dropping out of college altogether (Nguyen, 2012, p. 2). Borrowers who drop out (all degree levels combined) were found to be unemployed at a rate 10% higher than borrowers who complete; differences also include lower median incomes and a greater likelihood to default on their loans (Nguyen, 2012, p. 4-5).

Financial implications of college dropout are broad, but so too are the potential psychological and emotional consequences of failure to complete one's degree. Smith (1982) further explored Campbell's dropout-psychological strain hypothesis that posits that even after two decades have passed after such an educational setback, there are still lingering negative effects on psychological well-being primarily due to the gap between expected and actual personal success. While the original dropout-psychological strain hypothesis did not distinguish significant differences in psychological consequences of failure to complete a degree, Smith's research found more support for Campbell's hypothesis among graduate than undergraduate dropouts. This is somewhat expected given that graduate students presumably have a much more specific, defined career path in mind than undergraduates who may be exploring career options as they seek to earn a bachelor's degree.

While attrition has obvious financial and psychological consequences to students, colleges and universities have the added reputational and financial pressure that comes with losing high numbers of students. Raisman (2013) conducted an analysis of over 1600 US institutions and found that almost $16.5 billion was lost collectively for the 2010-2011 academic year, with the largest one-year loss for a single institution netting over $100 million (p. 4). Interestingly, patterns did not emerge based on institution type, sector, or cost; rather, this is a shared phenomenon with institutions of higher education alike struggling to combat the financial and reputational burdens that come with student loss. In addition to institutional financial costs, the nation ends up feeling the financial pain. Research by the American Institutes for Research found that $3.8 billion dollars in lost income, $566 million in lost federal income taxes, and $164 million in lost state income taxes can be attributed to students who began in 2002 as full-time bachelor degree seeking students but after six years had not graduated (Schneider & Yin, 2011).

The amount of revenue lost, coupled with 6-year graduation rates for for-profit institutions at 20.3%, public institutions at 31.4%, and private nonprofit institutions at 52.7% shines a very bright light on a gloomy picture, with some institutions' abilities to continue to attract new enrollments a serious concern (percentages represent first-time, full-time undergraduate students from 2004 cohort) (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). While new enrollments are essential to the livelihood of an institution, the cost associated with recruiting new students typically far exceeds that of retaining existing ones (Kara & DeShields, 2004). Thus, to retain students you must first attract them, and to attract them, you must continue to retain them. This cyclical relationship illustrates the added importance of proactively identifying and addressing the gaps and barriers in the student experience in order to improve and thrive within the growing, competitive higher education environment.

While institutions of higher education, without question, have unique characteristics that distinguish them from others, issues with retention provide common ground for exploration across institution and sector type. As educators and administrators continue to search for ways to better prepare, engage, motivate, and support students in their academic pursuits, it is critical

that researchers in this area continue to investigate ways to improve the student experience and, ultimately, graduation rates and career advancement opportunities.

Common Ground in Retention Issues

Tinto (1975), with his introduction of a student integration model, is often credited with providing a springboard by which student retention was more widely discussed and approached through scientific inquiry. Unlike his predecessors, who focused predominantly on institutional and academic factors, Tinto (1975) emphasized the social aspects that are, in effect, layered on top of the educational experience. Though he was not the first to study persistence in higher education, his model laid the foundation for many other researchers to replicate, revise, and often refute the fundamentals of his theory (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

In subsequent decades, in an effort to better understand the unique characteristics that predict whether or not a student retains, many researchers focused their investigations on specific populations, including those based on demographics (for example, traditional and non-traditional; domestic and international; first generation and non-first generation students), longevity with the institution (that is, first year compared with later years), discipline, degree level, and a number of other individual factors, such as financial status, continuous enrollment, motivation, level of engagement, and commitment that students bring to their educational experience. While differences do emerge across these variables, a high-level view of the literature suggests that student retention is still a common problem across all of these segments and that issues that relate to student success are more similar than dissimilar.

Furthermore, based on the current environment in higher education including changes in government policy and regulations, focus on institution type (for example, 2-year community colleges and 4-year undergraduate institutions; public and private institutions)) has expanded in recent years to include distinctions among the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. Much research shows that the similarities across all institution types and sectors outweigh the dissimilarities in terms of student risk factors and persistence trends; however, it is noteworthy that while these obstacles are often shared, the ways in which institutions approach resolving them sometimes differ. As such, we felt the need to further explore this area of retention research.

Common Ground in For-profit and Nonprofit Institutions

With the struggling U.S. economy and increasing projections of jobs requiring more than a high school diploma, student retention is ever more important to colleges and universities. In fact, the President of the United States has issued a goal for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020 (The White House, n.d.). Despite differences between for-profit and nonprofit institutions, some of which are outlined below, it is important to keep in mind that all U.S. institutions work toward a common goal of student success, resulting in a better prepared, adaptive, productive American workforce.

Student Demographics

The for-profit sector seems to be serving a different student than public and private nonprofit institutions. In particular, Fall 2011 full-time undergraduate students enrolled at 4-year

for-profit institutions tended to be much older, with 71% being 25 years of age or older compared with 12-13% of public and private nonprofit institutions (Aud et al., 2013). Race/ethnicity is another area where the student types differ between for-profit and nonprofit institutions. At 4-year degree granting institutions in Fall 2011, public and private nonprofit institutions serve a student population where 64%-69% of students were white compared to for-profit institutions where only 50% were white (Aud et al., 2013). Additionally, for-profit institutions that granted post-baccalaureate degrees in Fall 2011 served a student group where white students made up 49% of the population, as compared to public institutions and private nonprofit institutions where 72% and 69% of the student population, respectively, was white (Aud et al., 2013).

Though less prevalent, differences also exist in male/female ratios. Specifically, in Fall 2011, counts of 4-year undergraduate female students at public and private nonprofit institutions made up between 54%-57% of enrollment while at for-profit institutions they make made up 62% (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). These statistics go beyond simply outlining a difference in populations at these institutions; they give valuable insight into the types of institutions different students seek out and ultimately choose based on the ability to meet their needs. Acknowledging that there are different challenges to persistence based on age, ethnicity, and sex, one must be cautious when comparing retention rates across institution type.

Higher Education Landscape

As the population of students seeking a post-secondary degree has shifted, so has the demand for other options outside of the traditional, land-based college experience. The inflexible options of a traditional, land-based institution simply will not work for many of today's learners who must work towards their educational goals while juggling many other responsibilities. Whether those responsibilities require flexibility in time, geography, or both, distance education programs (many of which fall within the for-profit sector, although more public and private nonprofit institutions are providing distance education) provide a valuable alternative to students advancing their knowledge, skills, and workforce marketability that in the past, had to be placed on hold (often indefinitely and sometimes permanently) in order to meet other life demands. For-profit, online institutions recognize their reach is virtually limitless, unbound by region or locale (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007), and the sector as a whole has been responsive to the adult student population with accelerated learning models, flexible class schedules, and career oriented programs (Kazis et al., 2007). In fact, in Fall 2012, approximately 2.1 million students were enrolled in for-profit colleges and universities across the U.S., accounting for nearly 10% of all student enrollments (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). Given that in the mid-1980s, the market share of U.S. for-profit schools was only 2%, this represents major growth in the sector (Bennett, Lucchesi, & Vedder, 2010) and a clear indication that for-profit schools often provide an educational opportunity that otherwise might not exist. The characteristics of this group are inherently different and the structure required to support them through successful completion of their programs is often unique.

Institutional Business Plan

There are clear differences in for-profits and nonprofits in terms of how and why financial decisions are made within the organization; however, such differences are diminishing as financial pressures at many institutions require different operating models (see Ehrenberg,

2010, for a discussion of this related to faculty models). Tierney and Hentschke (2007) provided a comprehensive review of the unique differences between for-profit and nonprofit institutions, noting that traditional institutions "have little idea of the costs associated with teaching, research, and service" (p. 18), while for-profits are at the opposite end of that spectrum, with robust financial assessments of every aspect of the organization. This difference alone can change the operating culture of these institutions; for-profits, as compared to nonprofits, tend to focus on marketability of programs, as students are seen more as "consumers" of a product (education) that will help them to secure a job (or some other personal goal). That being said, for-profit and nonprofit institutions alike demand students meet certain expectations towards earning a degree. However, for-profits typically see that responsibility as more shared among administrators, faculty, and students, with greater accountability on the part of the institutions. Such a focus can help institutions to embrace disruptive innovation, experimenting more readily with new approaches and processes that will improve the student experience (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007).

Regardless of institution type or sector, colleges and universities nationwide struggle with student retention (Sternberg, 2013). It is quite common to find articles on higher education news sites that mention retention risk factors, solutions, and perspectives (Inside Higher Ed, 2013). Because differences in student populations and business models often exist among for-profit and nonprofit institutions, some have questioned the legitimacy and value of for-profit colleges and universities. However, research indicates that for-profit institutions achieve comparable (and often better) retention and graduation rates as compared to their traditional, non-profit counterparts, especially for those students who fall into high-risk categories based on multiple factors (Swail, 2009). Thus, educators must be cautious about perceived differences in quality based solely on institution type. In fact, research has shown that student characteristics are much more predictive than institutional factors in terms of attrition outcomes (Gramling, 2013; Reason, 2009). Therefore, despite general differences in student demographics, market share, and business models (that appear to be eroding over time), student characteristics still supersede any institutional differences in terms of impact on retention.

Future Directions

Certainly, a great deal of the responsibility for student achievement falls squarely on the student. However, colleges and universities share that responsibility. Regardless of institution type or sector, it must provide a resource-rich, supportive environment for students to persist and accomplish their educational goals. Future research should focus on the specific academic and social factors that present barriers to student progress, with special attention paid to different student populations. Further, additional research is needed to better understand the factors that influence enrollment choice, as well as the circumstances around the decision to persist or drop out. Finally, it is our assertion that more emphasis should be placed on student progress and retention in academic presentations and publications. Such research is needed to advance our understanding of the factors related to persistence and retention that, in turn, can lead to innovative solutions that help students achieve the outcomes they desire.

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