Building Relationships, Empowering Students, and Taking Responsibility: The Importance of Departmental Action in Promoting Student Success

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Abstract

With increasing pressure in higher education to retain and ultimately graduate students, it is essential that university administrators, faculty and staff develop, implement, and assess the effectiveness of initiatives that promote student success. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion between higher education faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders regarding the importance of contextually specific success initiatives for all university students. The consideration of key areas of student engagement, student advisement, and student remediation in the context of best practices and current, departmentally designed student support initiatives is the focus of this paper.

Keywords: retention, student success, student engagement, student advisement
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Introduction and Literature Review

In the current political and economic climate, now more than any other time in the history of higher education, universities and colleges face the challenge to ensure students remain enrolled in academic programs and complete their degrees. The majority of four-year institutions reported a marked increase in efforts to enroll and retain students in the fall of 2012 (Noel-Levitz, 2012). At the national level, only 56 percent of the students who enroll in four-year degree programs actually graduate within six years and only 29 percent who begin two-year programs graduate within three years (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011). In response to this concern, political pressure to increase the percentage of college graduates has emerged. President Obama has set a national goal of having a higher percentage of college graduates, thus increasing America’s international competitiveness and economic stability. Specifically, the President established the goal for an additional five million Americans to earn a college degree or certificate by 2019 (Johnson & Rochkind with Ott & Dupont, 2011).

Increasing economic and political pressure has led to an increase of professional literature identifying the variables influencing student choices to continue or discontinue their pursuit of higher education. Recently, more studies of university-level initiatives to understand and address these variables, have begun to be analyzed and reported (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011). A review of the literature seems to indicate the majority of studies focus on the success of university-level initiatives with full-time freshman students and their persistence to the second year of study. While the conclusions and recommendations from the authors of these studies have documented some promising results, they fail to address the retention issues plaguing colleges and universities in a comprehensive manner.

The literature suggests that universities have placed more emphasis on recruitment efforts than retention, resulting in inadequate resources for retention efforts and a lack of authority for the staff charged with designing and implementing retention initiatives (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011). Retention rates have yet to increase at four-year institutions, despite the efforts and attention associated with retaining students and increasing graduation rates (Troy, Jones, Lynch, & Tomassi, 2009).

The professional literature documents many of the variables associated with student success (ACT, 2010). These include, but are not limited to: prior academic success (High School GPA, ACT, SAT scores), student engagement (institutional commitment, campus connections, faculty/student interactions), student motivation (educational aspirations, career goals, self-efficacy and resilience), financial resources (SES, family support, financial aid) and student knowledge regarding college culture and expectations (expectations and requirements) (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). According to the College Board Study on Student Retention (2009), virtually all institutions (98.8%) analyze student retention annually, 95 percent
analyze by class and year, 88 percent analyze by race and ethnicity and 70.9 percent analyze data by student major. While Lotkowski et al. (2004) conclude that the majority of universities are emphasizing retention efforts, they acknowledge that these efforts are underfunded and lack contextual specificity. The lack of contextual specificity in the College Board Study on Student Retention (2009) can be found in many of the published studies regarding student retention. Contextually specific studies that explore variables and initiatives associated with student success and retention beyond the first year requires further exploration, evaluation and reporting in the professional literature.

As the variables associated with student retention and success have become well documented, the number of university-level initiatives to improve student persistence and therefore university retention rates have increased. Studies documenting university initiatives to improve student retention rates are now appearing throughout the ever growing body of higher education literature (The Retention Agenda, 2013). However, the majority of retention related research focuses on improving retention rates for freshmen students, even though freshmen are the minority of students represented at virtually every four-year institution of higher education (Olcott & Kotovich, 2007). The fact that retention rates have remained stable or continued to drop over the last two decades indicates the need to examine the effectiveness of current retention efforts and expand these efforts to include college students beyond the freshman class (Troy et al., 2009).

A contextual, comprehensive understanding of student needs is important in the development of initiatives to promote student success. To be effective, retention efforts must accurately assess and address the specific needs of students (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011). Because of the variation of student diversity across departments (i.e., engineering students vs. psychology students), contextually specific retention initiatives may be best developed at the departmental or program level (Bugeja, 2013). The purpose of this article is to encourage discussion among higher education faculty, administrators and other stakeholders regarding the extension of retention initiatives beyond freshman cohorts. Perhaps equally important is the consideration that department-level efforts to promote student success may be more contextually specific, and therefore better suited, to address the unique needs of students than university-level initiatives. Collaborative efforts among university faculty, staff, and administration regarding student retention are essential if we are to offer a comprehensive program that addresses students’ academic and non-academic needs as they persist in their academic careers (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

With the ever-increasing pressure to promote student success and increase retention rates, it is imperative that administrators, faculty and staff at all levels embrace their roles in student success initiatives. A common faculty concern related to assuming additional student success responsibilities includes fear that these efforts are not recognized during the annual evaluation, tenure and promotion processes. Faculty members are generally evaluated on teaching, research and service with research being weighted more heavily at most universities. Time allocated to student success initiatives may detract from time spent on research related activities. University administrators must address this faculty concern in order for faculty to invest the time and effort needed for student success initiatives.
Discussion of Contextually Specific Student Success Initiatives

Because there is little in the professional literature regarding department-level activities to promote student success and increase retention and graduation rates, the following introduces and describes several department-level initiatives. Readers should be aware that the majority of these initiatives have been implemented within the past two years, and data collection regarding their effectiveness is currently underway. With the proper support from administrators, departmental faculty and staff are uniquely positioned to assess student needs and develop appropriate, contextually specific interventions to promote student success. Faculty and staff interact with students on a daily basis and are directly confronted with the challenges associated with student success. Student success initiatives appropriate for department-level action include student engagement, advisement, and remediation initiatives.

Student Engagement

Recognition of the importance of effectively engaging students occurs throughout the professional literature on student success and retention (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Opportunities for students to become involved in campus programs and services are critical to student retention and have been highlighted as one of the most influential areas in student retention (ACT, 2010). Most of the discussion regarding student engagement is focused on university-level initiatives. The authors of this article suggest that university-level initiatives should augment, not substitute, department-level engagement initiatives. There are many ways to effectively engage students both within and beyond the classroom, and the benefits of engagement extend beyond academic performance to retention and persistence (Curseo & Farnum, 2011). These activities include promoting both membership and involvement in departmental student organizations, training faculty to understand the importance of investing time and energy in getting to know their students beyond the confines of the traditional classroom and effectively utilizing social media. In order to engage students, faculty must assess and address the unique needs of their students, designing and implementing policies and procedures that are responsive to student needs.

Student organizations.

While departmental student organizations are created and maintained to perform a variety of functions that may vary between departments, most share the goal of providing students opportunities for social connections and support, leadership, and learning (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Holzweiss, Rahn, & Wickline, 2007). Although most organizations are governed by an elected student leadership team, their success is dependent upon faculty involvement, investment and leadership. Faculty participation in student organization leadership meetings, general membership meetings and special activities allows faculty to model appropriate professional behaviors, interact with students on a more personal level, and effectively advocate for student and organization resources. Student organizations offer social opportunities for students to connect with fellow students and lend themselves readily to faculty mentorship (Kuh, 2008). Students need integration into university life, and this can happen through increased student-student interaction, as well as faculty-student interaction, both of which departmental student organizations can facilitate.
In order to enhance the effectiveness of student organizations in the area of student engagement within our department, faculty participate in student organization leadership meetings with student officers on a biweekly basis and larger organizational meetings on a monthly basis. One or two meetings a semester will not satisfy student interests or needs and, arguably, will not demonstrate faculty commitment or foster faculty student relationships. All departmental faculty members should be encouraged to present at organizational meetings throughout the semester. This provides students an opportunity to get an alternative experience with faculty members outside of the classroom. By sharing their expertise with students in this setting, students are exposed to professional knowledge and skills in a wide range of areas. Likewise, this invites interested students to become more involved in faculty research and service projects that align with the students’ professional goals. By increasing faculty engagement with students and student engagement with peers, direct and indirect influence of student achievement motivation and academic self-confidence can occur.

Departmental graduation exit surveys indicate students report gaining leadership skills because of membership in our departmental undergraduate student organization. Consistent with the literature’s focus on the value of student organizations for social connections, our students also reported making friends and “working with scholarly, like-minded people who genuinely care”. The effects of faculty mentorship were evident when students reported gaining opportunities for professional development and experiential learning through volunteer efforts and service relevant to their intended field and professions.

Social media.

Whether you are a social media fan or not, it is increasingly difficult to deny its day-to-day impact on students. Social networking has become an integral part of U.S. college students’ daily lives and experiences, with 94% of first-year college students indicating that they regularly use social media sites (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; New Media Consortium, 2007; Cotten, 2008; and Higher Education Research Institute, 2007). Social media has positive effects on student learning and engagement (Junco, Heigenbert, & Loken, 2011). However, there is a lack of information in the literature regarding the potential benefits and risks associated with departmental social media connections, possibly leaving many departments reluctant to join the social media frenzy sweeping our culture. Departments choosing to join the social media movement should begin by reviewing institutional social media policies and engaging faculty in the development of departmental policies. Establishing policies and gaining administrative approval allows departments to embrace social media as an additional resource to engage students and improve faculty-student contact in a way that is attractive to students’ “digital lifestyles” (Junco et al., 2011, p. 128).

The authors of this article participated in the establishment of a departmental social media policy and the implementation of a departmental social media campaign to engage students. A department Facebook page was created with only select faculty having access to post and monitor the page. The department chose not to allow students to post to the page due to a lack of resources to support constant and consistent monitoring of posts. All students in the department were invited to “like” the departmental page through personal invitations from faculty teaching their courses, email invitations sent to all departmental students and “Like Us”
posters displayed on the departmental bulletin board and college electronic information monitors. The departmental faculty administrator for the Facebook page ensures that important student information is posted multiple times throughout the week. Important announcements regarding student research, learning, service, social activities and job opportunities are routinely promoted via social media. The department assessment committee is currently drafting new exit survey questions to assess the effectiveness of current social media efforts.

**Student Advisement**

Academic advisement methods have received much attention in the professional literature in recent years. Changes to the federal Pell Grant Program and increasing student loan debt have contributed to the importance of assessing the effectiveness of academic advisement procedures. As with many other student success initiatives, most of the documented initiatives to improve student advisement have been initiated at the university-level with freshman students. There seems to be a slow movement at many institutions towards a centralized advising program at the university-level. Though this model is deemed effective, the cost of implementing a centralized advisement model may be considered cost-prohibitive by some universities (Oertel, n.d.). These programs tend to employ “professional advisors” rather than faculty to provide academic advisement services to students (Habley & Morales, 1998).

For many seasoned faculty members, it is hard to comprehend how university-level “professional advisors”, most of whom do not have educational or professional experience in the student’s field, can provide effective guidance to students. If advisement were limited to course scheduling, this model could perhaps be beneficial. However, the preponderance of scholarly research examining advisement promotes a more holistic view of student advisement that includes mentoring, course planning, scheduling of classes, monitoring degree progress, recommending and coordinating remediation efforts, and linking students to appropriate support services (Noel, 1985).

While the quality of academic advisement is not solely responsible for student persistence, it is one critical element associated with student success. “Academic advising is the only structured activity on the campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-to-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution.” (Habley, 1994, p.10). Effective advisement connects students to needed resources, provides essential academic and career information, facilitates critical thinking and problem solving skills, and promotes relationships between students and the institution. Faculty advisors who, through their advisement efforts, demonstrate their care for students and their desire for them to succeed has been touted as the “most potent retention force on a campus” (Noel, 1985, p. 17). In essence, effective, holistic student advisement facilitates personal future building, an identified action critical to student retention, wherein mentored students can identify and clarify their goals and map out strategies for achieving those goals (ACT, 2010).

**Advisement and support center.**

Because effective advisement is central to student success, it is imperative that departments assume a central role in establishing and implementing effective advisement
protocols. Given administrative support and sufficient resources, departments can establish student advisement and support centers independent of other departments within their college or in combination with other departments with similar student demographics and needs. Department administrators and faculty should consider the role of faculty and staff members, as well as graduate and undergraduate students in the operation of these centers. Our department recently began participation in a college-level student advisement and support center in the spring term of 2013. The advisement and support center currently serves two departments with similar student demographics and needs. The center is staffed by graduate students who are trained to utilize a manualized approach to student advisement. Faculty with expertise in the area of advisement and departmental faculty supervise graduate students reviewing and approving their advisement recommendations.

The center is open to students throughout the week; and no appointments are necessary. Student use of the center has been impressive, and student satisfaction surveys have indicated that they find the advisement center support valuable. Of the 98 students who completed evaluation surveys on their advisement center experiences in the spring, 2013 term, 97% indicated their overall experiences to be “very positive” or “positive”. Students also highly rated the value of their advisement and support experiences. Of 91 respondents, 89% indicated they would recommend the advisement center to other students, and 98% indicated they would return to the advisement center, as needed. The impact of the advisement center on students’ personal future building was also evident, with 88% indicating they were better prepared to work through future academic problems on their own and 92% indicating they had a strong understanding of student resources available to them. Perhaps most significant was the finding that ninety-one percent of the 91 respondents indicated that their experience with their academic advisor positively affected the chance that they will stay in college.

Trained graduate student advisors provide services in the area of course scheduling, academic problem solving, and making referrals to department, college and university student support services. Because most of the graduate students who staff our advisement and support center are graduates of our undergraduate program and very successful students, they are in a unique position to provide contextually specific advisement to the students they serve. In addition to course scheduling, advisement center staff also assists students with study sessions in the center and provide assistance with difficult course assignments. Throughout the week, undergraduate students have access to course scheduling and academic planning and tutoring services without the need for an appointment or the challenges of approaching departmental faculty or administrators.

Because the center relieves faculty of most routine course scheduling activities, faculty utilize the time previously dedicated to this effort to mentor students regarding career decisions and related educational, service and research opportunities. Both the center staff and faculty strive to assist students in setting short and long term academic and career goals. This approach supplements and supports faculty involvement with students rather than replacing it like many university-level initiatives. The relationships faculty are able to develop with students through these mentorship opportunities are apparent in the responses we routinely see on our departmental graduation exit surveys. In response to the question “What was most beneficial to you as a student in the department?” In response, our students often cite their relationships with
their professors and faculty mentors as the most beneficial aspect of being part of our department.

Faculty mentorship.

Unfortunately, most doctoral level graduate programs underemphasize the importance of teaching their students to be effective educators in the current academic context. Doctoral students who go on to become faculty members often choose to simply model the teaching and student engagement behaviors of their professors. Those students are then expected to become professors who can function adequately as advisors without appropriate training or support (O’Banion, 1994). Therefore, it is essential that department-level administrators and faculty develop a plan to mentor new faculty on effective teaching, advising and student engagement tactics. While this occurs more easily in a department that embraces a culture of promoting student engagement and success, it can be quite challenging in a culture that more highly values student and faculty independence.

Mentoring new faculty within the department in the areas of teaching, advising and student engagement can be accomplished by assigning a more experienced faculty member to serve as a faculty mentor and through the scheduling of training sessions that focus on effective teaching and advising methods, individualized instruction, and student engagement strategies. Expectations regarding teaching, student success and student engagement should be clearly stated and evaluated annually and during the tenure and promotion process. Now more than ever, departmental success is dependent upon student success, and student success is strongly associated with quality teaching, advisement, and strong student-faculty relationships.

Student Remediation

The professional literature identifies academic stimulation and assistance, defined as challenge in and support for academic performance, as critical in the realm of student retention (ACT, 2010). Because greater numbers of students are entering colleges and universities unprepared for success in college level courses, it is essential that colleges and universities increase their efforts to identify students needing additional assistance and enrich their initiatives to remediate students with deficiencies (Fain, 2013). This additional learning support may include supplemental instruction, reading and math center labs, comprehensive learning assistance centers, and summer bridge/tutoring/remediation programs (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). While math and reading support centers may be best suited for implementation at the university-level, supplemental instruction and comprehensive learning and assistance centers are likely to be more effective if they are context specific, based on specific student needs. Students likely to need remediation or additional academic support include those enrolled in courses identified as academically challenging, those on academic probation, and those who lack achievement motivation and/or academic self-confidence.

Faculty members need to remain mindful that students enter our institutions with labels attached to them based on high school GPA, ACT and SAT scores, and SES. These labels often impede students in their academic pursuits and may become self-fulfilling prophesies for academic failure and subsequent dropout. Academic self-confidence and achievement
motivation are two non-academic factors critically related to student retention. Student success initiatives, including remediation efforts, must address these areas in order to accomplish the goal of increasing academic performance (Lotkowski et al., 2004).

**Supplemental instruction.**

The department may find it necessary to design supplemental instruction programs to assist students in academically challenging courses. The source of determining the necessity of supplemental instruction differs from other student success initiatives in that courses are the target of intervention rather than specific students (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Departmental faculty and administrators should be positioned to quickly review course data and identify which courses are the most challenging for students and may therefore benefit from supplemental instruction. This assessment of academically challenging courses within departments may include a review of student performance on specific assignments and assessments within academically challenging courses to identify problem areas for students. Once identified, developing action plans to increase student knowledge and skills and enhance student performance is possible.

In order to increase the effectiveness of supplemental instruction, faculty members teaching academically challenging courses need additional mentoring and training in order to maximize student connection to and involvement in course content and processes. One way to accomplish this without overwhelming faculty resources is to effectively utilize graduate teaching assistants and student support centers in these courses. If students are struggling with a pre-identified course assignment or assessment, students within the course could be encouraged or required to visit the departmental student success/advisement center for additional training, practice or feedback on assignment specifics. Clear communication between instructors teaching these courses and student success/advisement center staff is essential for success in this venture.

**Academic probation initiatives.**

For the purpose of this article, probationary students are students whose grade point average falls below a 2.0 on a 4-point scale. According to Cruise (2002), it is important to distinguish between at-risk students and probationary students. At-risk students have been identified based on socioeconomic status, employment status, and prior academic deficits (high school GPA and standardized test scores) (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Santa Rita & Scranton, 2001). While some at-risk students end up on academic probation, many do not. Also, many students on academic probation were not previously classified as at-risk students (Cruise, 2002). In fact, many students who are forced to withdraw from college due to poor academic performance often cite non-academic reasons such as family or emotional troubles for their lackluster academic performance, granting further justification for enacting contextually specific polices, practices, and programs that address the non-academic social and emotional needs of students to bolster academic success (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011).

It is vitally important that universities, colleges, and departments develop and implement effective strategies for assisting probationary students that go beyond simply improving academic performance. While most universities publish minimum procedures for assisting probationary students, departments need to go beyond minimum standards to assist students with
academic struggles. At many universities, department and college level Academic Standards Committees oversee the requirements for probationary students. One widely used approach is to simply require the probationary student to improve his/her semester GPA in order to bring up the student’s overall GPA. Few publications exist on the success of these initiatives.

Effective initiatives for assisting probationary students are often time intensive and involve effective interviewing skills designed to increase understanding of the barriers underlying student performance. These efforts should be positively focused on increasing student motivation, setting attainable goals that are consistent with the student’s career plans, and assisting the student in identifying and removing barriers to student success. Cruise (2002) proposes that probationary students should be consistently engaged with faculty and advisors through normally scheduled meetings to discuss student concerns and promote student success. In addition to requiring students who are on probation to increase their GPAs, our department academic standards committee began requiring students to check in weekly or bimonthly with their faculty mentor or with the student success/advisement center. This encourages students to remain engaged and provides the department opportunities to increase student support and intervene early if a student begins to struggle. Utilizing an integrated approach to remediation, in which the faculty is cognizant of the relationships between a student’s social and emotional needs and his/her academic needs facilitates student success and persistence, thus increasing retention rates (Lotkowski et al., 2004).

Conclusion

Collaborative efforts among university administration, faculty and staff are essential for the development, implementation, and assessment of contextually specific initiatives that promote student success and increase retention and graduation rates of university students. Successful collaboration supports student retention initiatives at the university, college, and department levels and involves administrators, faculty, and staff. In order to increase faculty investment in student success initiatives, university administrators and faculty must support policy changes that reward faculty efforts through the annual evaluation and tenure and promotion processes. Increasing student success is a university responsibility and must become a university priority (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011).

Because student needs and abilities vary between majors, department-level assessment of student needs must occur in order to develop and deliver contextually specific initiatives to increase student success and retention. Departments must embrace a culture that challenges faculty to invest their time and energy into supporting student success both within and beyond the traditional classroom setting. Likewise, the departmental culture must support faculty efforts by acknowledging success during the annual evaluation and tenure and promotion process. Promoting faculty involvement in engagement activities through participation in student organization leadership and membership meetings and departmental social media activities may increase both student to faculty engagement and student-to-student engagement.

Effective advisement of students includes mentoring, course planning, scheduling of classes, monitoring of degree progress, recommending and coordinating remediation efforts, and linking students to appropriate support services based on each student’s individual needs. One
strategy to improve advisement efforts includes the use of department or college-level student advisement and support centers to address the contextually specific needs of students. In order to support the efficient operation of these centers, it is necessary to utilize faculty, graduate assistants and student mentors, as well as faculty with training and expertise in the area of academic advisement.

As universities are admitting more and more students who may not be properly prepared for academic success in higher education, the development of initiatives that provide additional academic support/remediation are essential (Fain, 2013). These efforts may include supplemental instruction and effective policies and procedures for working with students on academic probation. Supplemental instruction is designed to assist students in academically challenging courses within their degree programs. Unlike other student success initiatives, supplemental instruction targets courses and assignments within courses rather than specific students (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Additional training to maximize student engagement and involvement for faculty teaching academically challenging courses is recommended. In addition, the utilization of graduate assistants and student advising and support centers is important to promote student success in these courses.

Effective academic standards policies and procedures are another remediation effort that can potentially increase student success. There is little documentation in the professional literature regarding the success of remediation efforts that focus solely on requiring the probationary student to improve his/her semester GPA and, thereby, raise the cumulative GPA. Perhaps the holistic view of advising recommended by Noel (1985) should also be applied to academic standards policies and procedures. Too often, academic standards policies and procedures are retroactive in nature, enacted after the student is already in poor academic standing. Early intervention and consistent engagement should be considered key practices in the practice of remediation and shift the policies and procedures to a more proactive stance (Cruise, 2002). Faculty and advisors should commit the time, skills, and effort needed to uncover the root of the student’s academic struggles and connect them to needed resources and support systems to bolster their academic performance by adequately addressing their non-academic social and emotional needs. Taking this holistic view of academic remediation does not negate the academic responsibility and initiative of the student. Rather, it reflects a willingness on the part of the faculty to support the academically troubled student in ways that are relevant to that individual student’s success and persistence while reminding the student of his/her obligation to do the work required to be academically successful (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011).

Faculty must be willing to teach and support the students who enter their programs, supporting them with educational programs and policies that build their academic confidence and motivation (Lotkowski et al., 2004). We suggest that successful retention is a product of a successful education, wherein collaborative agreements between all levels of the university strive to know their students, support their students, and engage their students.
References


