

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT RETENTION

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Student retention has become a challenging problem for the academic community; therefore, effective measures for student retention must be implemented in order to increase the retention of qualified students at institutions of higher learning. This paper suggests that institutional administrators, faculty, and students play a vital role in improving student retention. For instance, institutional administrators can help students stay in school by providing them with the appropriate funding, academic support services, and the availability of physical facilities, in addition to the effective management of multiculturalism and diversity on campus. Faculty members can help to maintain a positive learning environment for students by using multimedia technology and innovative instructional techniques such as cooperative and collaborative learning in the classroom. Ultimately, the success of college retention depends on the students themselves. Therefore, students must be motivated to participate actively in their own learning process.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, American institutions have experienced a major problem retaining students, particularly under-represented minorities. The loss of students returning to campus for another year usually results in greater financial loss and a lower graduation rate for the institution, and might also affect the way that stakeholders, legislators, parents, and students view the institution. Further, college administrators can attest to the high cost of recruiting in-coming students. Student retention is also an enormous problem in the United Kingdom, where the administrators of academic institutions now focus most of their efforts on decreasing student attrition, because the ability to retain students has become a determining factor in obtaining outside funding (Nash, 1996).

In this country, in 1995 the national average four-year graduation rate was only 38%, compared to the five-year and six-year graduation rates of 50% and 54% respectively (Money, 1997). While the average freshman retention rate for 1996 was 75%, studies indicate that colleges with high freshman retention rates tend to have a higher percentage of students graduating within four years; thus, saving the cost of an extra year or more of schooling.

Student retention has become a challenging problem for the academic community; therefore, an effective program for student retention must be implemented in order to increase the retention of qualified students. Institutions must work towards providing students with a meaningful learning environment, so that these students will become connected to

the institution by developing a sense of belonging within the student body. Therefore, every effort must be made to retain students while they are on campus.

REASONS FOR DROP-OUT

Research consistently indicates that college students who drop out usually do so by the time they finish their first year (Noel, Levitz, and Saluri, 1985). Unfortunately, the student retention rate usually includes students who were also transferred to other colleges. Therefore, the retention rate does not provide an accurate account of the number of students who actually dropped out of college. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why freshmen do not return to colleges for their sophomore year (Terenzini, et al. 1996). First, some students leave for reasons that may be beyond institutional control, such as lack of finances, poor student-institution fit, changing academic or career goals, or unrelated personal circumstances. Secondly, many more students leave because the institution has failed to create an environment, inside or outside the classroom, that is conducive to their learning and educational needs. These students do not return to their college because they are unhappy with the education that they are receiving. Thirdly, the inability to manage normal school work or to assimilate within the student population could discourage some students from returning for another year of torture. Students who lack the basic and fundamental skills, especially in mathematics and writing, are finding it difficult to cope with the normal course workload. Therefore, it is extremely important for institutional administrators to ensure that students fulfill their prerequisite requirements before taking upper

level courses, especially in the areas of writing and computer applications. Fourthly, freshmen might lack the motivation to do well in school, because they do not understand the importance of education, and/or do not know how to apply classroom-learned theories to real life problems. Further, the lack of appropriate role models or mentors in the academic environment could complicate this problem. Finally, during their first year at an academic institution of higher learning, freshmen might be overwhelmed with the transition from high school to college life, and they might become overly stressed by the dramatic changes even before they finish their first year of college.

EFFECTIVE WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENT RETENTION

In 1987, Vincent Tinto proposed the dynamic *Model of Institutional Departure*, stating that the student retention process is clearly dependent on the student's institutional experiences. In other words, students who are satisfied with the formal and informal academic and social systems in a college or university tend to stay in school. To the contrary, students who have negative interactions and experiences tend to become disillusioned with college, withdraw from their peers and faculty members, and ultimately, the institution. In the past twenty years, numerous comprehensive studies have concluded that institutional factors, such as faculty-student relationships and innovative teaching methods can significantly motivate and challenge students to learn and stay in school. *Figure 1* depicts several institutional factors that have an impact on the student's learning process, which are likely to result in a high-

er student retention rate, and ultimately, the probability of a higher graduation rate. These factors are discussed under three primary categories, specifically, institutional administrators, faculty, and students.

INSTITUTIONAL ADMINISTRATORS

To ease the student's transition from high school to college, higher education administrators must help students adjust to their new learning and living environments, and ensure that the institution is accommodating to the student's needs, interests, and learning styles. Academic administrators can increase the retention rate by ensuring that the following services are readily available to students.

Funding

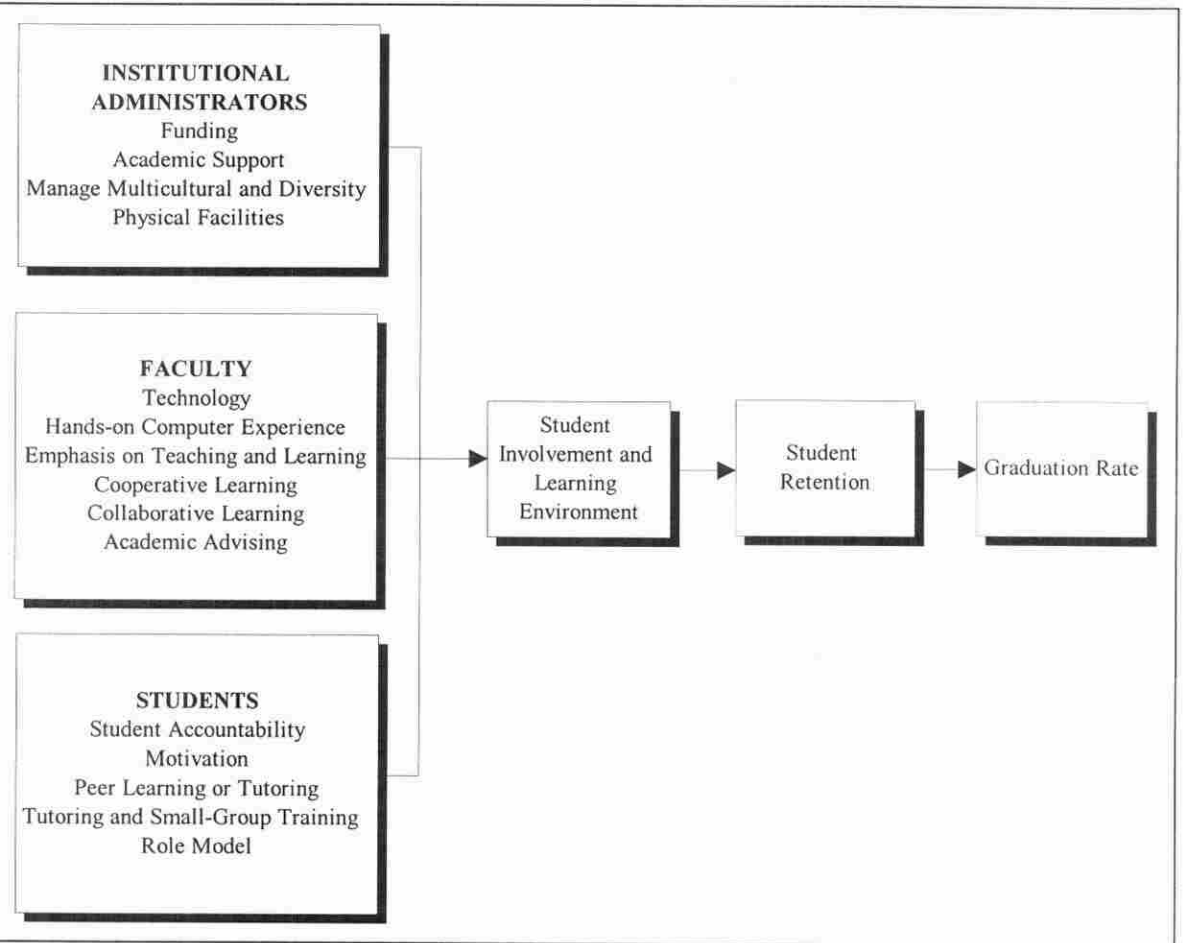
With the escalating costs of a college education, coupled with the diminishing availability of federal and state grants and loans, students are finding it increasingly more difficult to obtain financial assistance. Full-time students often have to work part-time in order to put themselves through school. Frequently, students 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. Studies have indicated that scholarship programs are needed because many students are motivated to improve their grades and stay in school with this type of funding. Towns' (1997) research concludes that students who received a lottery-funded Hope scholarship tended to remain in college and achieve higher grades than the average student. Therefore, students should be informed about the various types of financial aid and scholarship programs available, both on and off campus.

Academic Support

A study of the various academic support programs developed and implemented by six institutions (namely, North Carolina State, the University of Michigan, the University of South Carolina at Columbia, San Francisco State, Alabama A&M University, and the University of Missouri at St. Louis) indicates that academic and career advisors are essential to the success of student retention programs (Reyes, 1997). Institutional administrators should ensure that the following academic support services are readily available to students:

- **Learning Center.** Students who are experiencing academic difficulties must be strongly encouraged to seek tutoring assistance from the learning centers. If possible, faculty members should play an active role in continually identifying and recommending qualified students to work as tutors at the learning centers. Further, the learning centers must provide adequate and appropriate facilities to help students with learning disabilities achieve their full potential. Some learning centers provide resources to help students from disadvantaged socioeconomic and educational backgrounds deal with competing demands related to work, family, peers, culture, and schoolwork.
- **Freshman Year Programs.** At many higher-level institutions, freshmen are required to enroll in programs which help them adjust to campus life as well as life away from home. These programs have been found to produce higher academic achievements, increased student satisfaction, and increased student retention (Gaff, 1997).

Figure 1
Institutional Factors Affecting Student Retention



- **Honors Programs.** Academically talented students usually have a greater capacity for learning. Therefore, they should be encouraged to take intensive courses to provide them with new challenges, and to motivate them to reach their highest potential.

Managing Multiculturalism and Diversity

Besides pursuing a college education, students have to deal with both social and cultural issues on campus. This is an even bigger problem for non-traditional and first-generation students, who tend to expect the campus climate to be both alienating and intimidating (Terenzini, et al., 1996). For the past twenty years, there has been a change in the type of individuals attending academic institutions, moving from the traditional white male to the non-traditional minority female. There are several reasons for this shift. First, the implementation of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 opened doors for an increasing number of individuals with disabilities, such as impairments of mobility, vision, hearing, speech, or learning, to attend institutions of higher education (Dalke and Schmitt, 1987). On the other hand, more and more minorities are now attending two- and four-year institutions. In fact, Hodgkinson (1985) predicts that the percentage of minorities attending colleges could be as high as 33 percent by the year 2000. Similarly, there are an increasing number of foreign students, especially from countries such as China, Japan, Taiwan, and India, enrolling in American universities. The changes in students' attitudes, values, sexual preferences, and

family dynamics also contribute to the complexity of life on campus.

In order to effectively manage the diverse spectrum of academic, racial, ethnic, disabled, cultural, social, and sexual orientation issues on campus, institutional administrators are establishing special offices to manage multiculturalism and diversity. A well-managed multicultural office should provide students with a variety of opportunities for encounters with other people and ideas. The mission of these offices should include, though not be limited to, the following:

- To provide a friendly and harmonizing environment for students who come from different cultures and/or countries, resulting in the recruitment and retention of a diversified student body.
- To develop policies and programs that will enrich campus-wide understanding and appreciation of diversity, and to encourage multicultural awareness and sensitivity.
- To work with campus organizations, committees, and the local community on diversity-related activities.
- To ensure that student support services, academic support services, and co-curricular programs meet the needs of a diversified, multicultural, student body.

Physical Facilities

Surprisingly, physical facilities available on-campus can have an impact on student learning and can indeed contribute to the creation of a meaningful environment. Several of these physical facilities are described as follows:

- **Dormitories.** In some colleges, multi-cultural dorms are established to help students from differing cultural backgrounds cope with social diversity issues. For instance, some universities have established *An International Hall*, reserved specifically for foreign students to live. In other institutions, freshman dorms are reserved for those who choose to live with their peers.
- **Study rooms.** Study rooms located at the library and student union building provide a convenient location for students, especially those who commute or live off-campus, to catch up on their homework, to conduct group meetings, or to socialize with students.
- **Facilities for the Disabled.** First-year students with learning disabilities tend to have a greater problem adjusting to the academic community because they encounter greater academic challenges, less contact with faculty, and a drastic change in their social and support systems (Dalke and Schmitt, 1987). Consequently, institutions must make every effort to design and implement both individualized and general support services, specifically for students with all types of disabilities. These services will help to integrate this special group of students into the college community, and help them to become more productive citizens.
- **Career Centers.** Career counseling activities are more important to the upper-level students, who are afraid to face the future without the prospect of a job.
- **Social and Professional organizations.** Extracurricular activities and peer-group interactions can help the younger

students integrate smoothly into their new learning and living environments.

It is important that institutional administrators focus on developing and implementing academic, as well as social, programs that will promote each student's educational growth.

FACULTY

There is no doubt that faculty play a crucial role in promoting educational growth among students. There are several ways in which faculty members can help to maintain a positive learning environment for students.

Computer Technology

Multimedia technology provides effective attention-gathering tools and can be used to enrich and complement classroom teaching and learning, and may even reinvent subject matter (Brace and Roberts, 1997; Wise and Groom, 1996). Multimedia tools can often convey course materials to students in a visual and graphic form, which could help to clarify abstract concepts. Using the appropriate technologies, students can visualize the concepts in their mind, and are better able to absorb the material. The statement that *a picture is worth a thousand words* can never be overstated. In some instances, multimedia tools can remove barriers, such as language and physical handicaps (Moore and Miller, 1996).

Basic electronic components, such as overhead projectors and LCD panels, should be made available in every teaching classroom. Specially equipped classrooms should provide a wide range of computers, document cameras, VCRs, audio/visual media, communications, controls, and net-

work capabilities (Brace and Roberts, 1997). Instructional technology development centers must be set up to assist faculty members in developing, utilizing, and integrating the latest instructional technology into their course curricula to enhance classroom teaching and the learning process. Faculty must be continually educated concerning the latest techniques and technological know-how. In addition, there is an increasing demand for PowerPoint presentations and Web page development workshops at many universities and colleges. Institutional administrators must recognize that investment in the latest instructional technology is an on-going and necessary cost. Yet, the benefits to the university, faculty, as well as the students, can be dramatic in terms of increased student learning and retention. In many situations, instructors put their course materials and lecture notes on the Internet for better access by their students. With the benefits provided by the use of technology, faculty members must make every effort to integrate this technology into the classroom.

Hands-on Computer Lab Experience

Student learning should extend from the teaching classroom to the computer laboratory. Multimedia, computer-based learning can be further strengthened with the assignment of appropriate hands-on computer lab activities that are challenging and purposeful. Students are often encouraged to intellectually integrate in-class learning with their computer experiences. This kind of assignment can enrich student learning, by providing them with the opportunity to understand difficult material in an out-of-classroom setting. As faculty members assign more home-

work that requires the use of computer technology, such as the use of spreadsheets, databases, and graphics presentation software packages, an up-to-date, reliable, and adequately maintained computer laboratory for the student community is a necessity in today's technology-focused society. In addition, hiring knowledgeable computer lab assistants to manage these technologies would definitely be helpful to students.

Emphasis on Teaching and Learning

Faculty must attempt to be less theoretical and more practical in preparing students for their future careers. Besides providing students with a basic understanding of a specific discipline, faculty members must help them to think logically, critically, and imaginatively, and to develop more effective oral and written communication skills. It is important that instructors concentrate on nurturing each student's critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity skills that are needed for the ever-changing world (Absher and Gatlin, 1997). Learning should be treated as a dynamic, not static, process.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is found to increase student retention, student satisfaction, cognitive skills, and active participation (Cooper, 1995). Therefore, students should be encouraged to learn from one another, to work effectively in group discussions, group projects, and group presentations, especially in courses such as programming (Dougherty, et al., 1995). Cooperative learning for students can be achieved through the use of problem-based learning methods, especially in

the fields of medicine, business, and the social sciences; case methods that analyze actual, real-life, business problems and decisions; and, simulation methods that allow students to participate in "real-time" problem-solving situations (Svinicki, Hagen, and Meyer, 1996). If it is possible, faculty should encourage the formation of groups that consist of a mix of students from various disciplines and academic levels as cooperative partners. In order to achieve maximum group performance, students must be educated in the concept of group dynamics, and the etiquettes of working in groups.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is a dynamic, student-centered, task-oriented learning process, involving the active participation of both faculty and students (Matthews, 1996). For instance, students are welcomed to work with peers and instructors to explore and understand the concepts and fundamentals of the subject discipline, and then to apply this newly acquired knowledge to practical situations. This innovative instructional technique assumes that students and faculty can learn from each other. Students frequently work in group projects, oral presentations, and student-directed class segments, where the faculty is always available to offer prompt and constructive feedback. However, it is imperative that students be educated to work in groups, and understand the responsibilities and dynamics of a collaborative setting to make this process effective.

Academic Advising

Academic advising should be treated as an on-going process, to be comple-

mented with periodical follow-up sessions throughout the semester. However, academic advising is more important to the freshmen than to seniors, because these newly arrived students tend to need more guidance and support from the academic community. Continuous interactions between students and their academic advisors are also important, and electronic mail is a good way for advisors and students to communicate with each other. If possible, students must be encouraged to take courses offered by their advisors, because the instructors are the best appraisers of their academic performance, and therefore, can validate their learning experiences. Positive reinforcement and support from faculty members will lead to favorable instructional experiences for students, and challenge them to move toward greater academic and interpersonal development.

It is well documented in the research literature that faculty's in- and out-of-class contact with their students has a profound influence on student learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Based on a multi-institutional comprehensive study by Wilson, Wood, and Gaff (1974) and Wilson, et al. (1975), exceptional and effective faculty members are those who:

- Work one-on-one with students who need special attention.
- Are accessible to students outside the classroom.
- Design learning activities so that students can become capable learners.
- Provide useful, timely, and consistent feedback to the students.
- Are personable and approachable.
- Take the initiative.

Such behaviors send subtle, but important, symbolic messages that the faculty member and the institution value students.

STUDENTS

The role of individual student effort cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, students themselves play a critical role in getting good grades and remaining in school. They must actively explore all opportunities presented by the campus community, and achieve a sense of belonging toward their new environment. These are ways that students can ease the process of adapting to the institutional system, and thus, increase their own chances of staying in school until they graduate.

Student Accountability

Students have a social and academic responsibility to participate actively in the learning process, and to adapt to their new learning environment. They must also be taught to account for their own actions. A student's immature behavior can result in serious consequences, such as academic probation or suspension. Students must constantly be forewarned of the serious consequences, if they are unable to maintain the minimum grade requirements to stay in school. Nonetheless, acceptance by their peers and faculty members also help to validate and affirm their capabilities in the learning process, and support their academic endeavors and social adjustment.

Motivation

Students who perform poorly during their freshmen year tend to be potential candidates for dropping out of school. Studies have indicated that motivation is a

prerequisite for student learning (Svinicki, Hagen, and Meyer, 1996), and students can foster this motivation by:

- Setting clear, explicit learning goals.
- Understanding the expectations of success; in other words, the greater the belief that the task can be accomplished, the greater is the motivation to try.

Career and learning centers of many academic institutions periodically provide useful programs to help students increase their self-esteem and the motivation to succeed.

Peer Teaching or Tutoring

Peer teaching or tutoring is another form of learning, in which students learn from teaching others, instead of learning independently for themselves. Benware and Deci (1984) and Bargh and Schul (1980) provide strong evidence in their experimental studies which conclude that peer teaching or tutoring increases the student's involvement in the learning process, and enriches the student's understanding of the course materials. Therefore, students must be encouraged to attempt all sorts of learning techniques, including peer teaching or tutoring, to facilitate their own learning.

Tutoring and Small-Group Training Program

Research has shown that tutoring and small-group training programs are most appropriate for improving both the student's communication and interpersonal skills (Morris, 1994). Therefore, faculty members teaching courses, such as business statistics and programming languages, should advocate learning via one-on-one tutoring or small group discussions.

Role Model

Students must be inspired to constantly seek out positive role models in the college community, such as administrators, faculty, fellow students, or even their parents or siblings. There is evidence to indicate that students who have continual contact with their role models during college tend to succeed and excel in classroom learning.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies several institutional factors that may affect student retention in academic institutions of higher learning. As illustrated in this study, institutional administrators, faculty, and students must redefine their individual roles and responsibilities, and work together as a unit to produce a meaningful and healthy academic community.

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The author seeks to bring the topic of self-study to the teacher education classroom. Her stories of her life as the daughter of an immigrant raise important issues of race, ethnicity, class and gender. She seeks to apply the insights of her self study to her own pedagogy; the results of a cutting edge pedagogy for the preparation of teachers. The book is presented in three sections: In Part 1, she presents the case that is crit-

ical for professors to practice self-study of their teaching practices in an effort to improve their students' learning. In Part II she explains her work context and personal efforts to shape pre-student teaching experience by structuring ways for pre-service teachers to learn by doing in real classrooms, gather support from peers and teachers, and how to practice the craft of teaching. In Part III she describes two case studies using her model, one inside and one outside the the given ream of teacher education.

