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# A sense of belonging: Improving student retention

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O'Keeffe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: Improving student retention. *College Student Journal*, 47(4), 605–613.

<https://researchrepository.rmit.edu.au/esploro/outputs/journalArticle/A-sense-of-belonging-Improving-student/9921862552801341>

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**Citation:**

O'Keeffe, P 2013, 'A sense of belonging: Improving student retention', College Student Journal, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 605-613.

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# A SENSE OF BELONGING: IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the causes and potential solutions to, student attrition. With student attrition rates reaching between 30 and 50 per cent in the United States, and over 20 per cent in Australia, the inability of higher education institutions to retain their students is a significant issue. This paper cites key risk factors which place students at risk of non-completion, which include mental health issues, disability, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Furthermore, first year students and higher degree by research students are susceptible to attrition. The capacity of a student to develop a sense of belonging within the higher education institution is recognised by this paper as a being a critical factor determining student retention. The creation of a caring, supportive and welcoming environment within the university is critical in creating a sense of belonging. This can be achieved by the development of positive student/faculty relationships, the presence of a well resourced counselling centre and the encouragement of diversity and difference.

*Keywords:* student attrition, student retention, mental health, student counselling, student faculty relationships.

## Introduction

Student attrition has become a major problem for higher education institutions across the world. This paper focuses on data, primarily sourced from studies conducted in the United States and Australia, to gauge the risk factors of student attrition, as well as investigating causes and potential solutions. The issue is of particular prominence in the United States, which has the highest rate of student attrition in the industrialised world (Harvard Graduate School of Education 2011, p.18). According to the former Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST 2004), "attrition rates provide a measure of the proportion of students who 'drop out' of an award course at an institution each year." The attrition rate amongst first year college students in the United States has been found to be between 30 and 50 per cent (American Institutes for Research 2010, p.16). In a paper

entitled 'Higher Education Attrition Rates 1994-2002: A Brief Overview', DEST state that the attrition rates for domestic commencing undergraduate students in Australia was 21.2 per cent, whereas the attrition rate for commencing international undergraduate students compared to 18.0 per cent (DEST 2004, p.4). Furthermore, DEST found that first year students were approximately twice as likely to drop out of study, than second year students (DEST 2004, p.4).

Student attrition costs universities in terms of lost revenue; however the lost investment in higher education is also extensive. A paper released by the American Institutes for Research, entitled 'Finishing the First Lap: The Cost of First Year Student Attrition in America's Four Year Colleges and Universities', revealed that between 2003 and 2008, US\$6.18 billion in subsidies were paid to colleges and universities to fund the education of students who exited tertiary education after one year

(American Institutes for Research 2010, p.16). Furthermore, US\$2.9 billion in State and Federal grants were paid to students who did not pursue a college education beyond their first year (American Institutes for Research 2010, p.16). For colleges and universities, high attrition rates and subsequently misappropriated resources do not reflect well upon the institution. As stated by Wimshurst, Bates and Wortley (2003, p.12), "Governments have become increasingly serious about a range of performance indicators, and particularly those indicators that point to progress or otherwise in areas such as: widening access to higher education, student retention, and the measurement of quality teaching and education."

The impact of student attrition is also felt in broader economic terms. US President Barack Obama referred to the fall of the US in terms of the proportion of young people with college degrees, stating that this "represents a threat to our position as the world's leading economy (American Institutes for Research 2010, p.1)." Furthermore, the OECD released a report in 2009, entitled 'Helping Youth to Get a Firm Foothold in the Labour Market', which contended that in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, low-skilled young people risked becoming excluded from the labour market (OECD 2009, p.5).

### **Students at Risk of Non-Completion**

The vulnerability of students is highlighted by Heisserer and Parette (2002, p.2), who state that students may experience "feelings that they don't belong, feel rejected, and may not adjust to normal academic challenges associated with college life." Such feelings of rejection and 'not fitting in' are closely related to student attrition. Heisserer and Parette (2002, p.2) identify several groups of students who are considered to be 'at risk' of non completion:

- ethnic minorities

- academically disadvantaged
- students with disabilities
- of low socioeconomic status
- probationary students

Furthermore, Collier and Morgan (2008, p.426) state that 'first generation college students' also should be considered as a student group which is at high risk of withdrawing from tertiary study; with the term 'first generation' referring to college students for whom neither parent has completed a four year higher education course (Collier and Morgan 2008, p.426).

The attrition rate of first year students within the United States has been cited as 30 per cent (American Institutes for Research 2010, p.30); while as mentioned, in Australia this rate is slightly lower, at 21 per cent for local students (DEST 2004). For first year students, their entry to university may coincide with a period of instability in their lives, which can disrupt the capacity of students to persist with their studies. Lee et al. (2009, p.306) cites numerous studies, which demonstrate that factors such as relocation for study, separation from family and friends, adjustment to academic life and expectations of faculty staff and the need to make new friends are all sources of stress which impact upon students capacity to adjust to higher education (Barr 2007; Dyson and Renk 2006; Kerr, Johnson, Gans and Krumrine 2004; Nipcon et al. 2006-2007). Furthermore, for part time students, the rate of attrition is even higher; with American Institutes for Research estimating this figure to be in excess of 50 per cent (American Institutes for Research 2010, p.16).

Students with mental illness are another group which are at risk of exiting university study prior to completion. In the United States, 4.7 per cent (or 5 million students), drop out of college due to mental illness each year (Stevenson 2010, p.42), whereas Trotter

and Roberts (2000) have linked student attrition in Australia with mental illness. Bishop (2010, p.251) contends that families are now recognising the serious mental health risks of higher education study, and as a result “will no longer be content to judge an institution on the basis of academic merits alone.” This raises the issue of mental health within the higher education sector as a multi-faceted issue for higher education institutions. Mental health of students is leading to student attrition, and the perception that the university is not well equipped to support the emotional and mental health needs of students may impact upon enrolments. Fundamentally, this is not merely an economic issue for universities, as student well being can be seriously comprised if the university is unable to create a caring environment, develop a sense of belonging among students, and provide adequate campus based counselling support.

### **The Disconnection of Students**

Developing a ‘sense of belonging’ is critical to the success of college students, particularly for the retention of students who are considered to be at risk of non-completion. However, a sense of belonging within the tertiary education environment can be elusive for students. Factors which lead to the disconnection of students from their tertiary institution are cited by O’Brien (2002, p.2), in a document released as part of the Queensland University of Technology First Year Experience program:

- Part time students and those working long hours in paid employment are less likely to see themselves as students and demonstrate a pattern of less attachment and commitment to aspects of university life and study.
- Diversity means increased numbers of students with family responsibilities and/or extra-curricular activities

- Advanced technology enabling remote access learning decreases the amount of time students need to spend on-campus.

While first year students are negatively impacted by isolation, higher degree by research students (HDR) have been identified as being similarly impacted, with the development of a sense of belonging cited as a critical component for success for these students (Latona and Browne 2001; Pearson 2012, p.191). The loss of connection between students and their tertiary institution is raised by Eisen et al (2009, p.455) who consider “the education system itself as a potential driver, or at least an enabler, of such student disconnectedness.” According to O’Brien (2002, p.2), financial pressures faced by universities, which have led to larger class sizes, higher teacher-student ratios and the extensive use of online learning materials have exacerbated this disconnection. Critically, O’Brien (2002, p.2) cites the disconnection of students as arising from “lack of personal feedback from academic staff as a contributory factor towards the risk of withdrawal and lack of integration between students and lecturers outside of the classroom, for example inaccessibility or unfriendliness of lecturers and administrative staff.”

### **Creating a Caring Environment to Support Student Retention**

That a student feels cared for is critical with the tertiary education environment, both in ensuring that students perform to the best of their abilities, and in preventing student attrition (Pearson 2012, p.188; Heisserer and Parrette 2002). As stated by McLean et al (1999), a ‘sense of connectedness’, or lack thereof, is a decisive factor in the withdrawal of students from equity group from their course. A sense of connection can emerge if the student has a relationship with just one key person within the tertiary institution and this relationship can significantly impact upon a students’

decision to remain in college (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Glennen, Farren, & Vowell, 1996; Heisserer and Parette 2002, p.1).

In terms of preventing student attrition, Heisserer and Parette (2002, p.6), state that "the single most important factor in advising students who are at-risk is helping them to feel that they are cared for by the institution (Bray 1985; Braxton et al. 1995; Holmes 2000; Tinto 1993)." Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004, p.1) found that students at Baylor University in the US indicated that caring staff members and a safe environment were cited by respondents as being the most desirable factors at university. For students with disabilities, Graham-Smith and Lafayette argue that the level of care for the student is particularly pertinent. As stated by Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004, p.1), "Care overcomes the sense of isolation and separateness that a student with disabilities feels and gives him/herself the permission to nevertheless belong and succeed in a frightening and challenging college environment." Conversely, Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004, p.2) argue that university staff and faculty members who are less sympathetic to the needs of students with disabilities can exacerbate the challenges experienced by students with disabilities. This clearly indicates the value of a positive relationship between students and faculty members, where the student is able to feel as though they are cared for by a significant figure within the university.

### **Student-Faculty Member Relationships and Student Well Being**

The relationship between a student and a key figure (whether this be faculty staff, student mentor or support staff) within the university can ensure that the student does not exit their course prior to completion. The motivation arising from a positive relationship that a student has with their faculty has been widely documented (Komarrju 2010; Jaasma and Koper 1999; Myers 2004; Martin,

Myers and Mottet 1999; Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie 2009). Komarrju (2010, p.332) contends that "students successful in knowing even one faculty member closely are likely to feel more satisfied with their college life and aspire to go further in their careers." As stated by Jaasma and Koper, the benefits for the student and the tertiary institution are mutual:

*"Not only do students and universities benefit from student-faculty out-of-class communication (OCC) in terms of overall retention, but also students realize benefits in the improved nature of their college experience. For example, students who engage in OCC with faculty showed greater academic and cognitive development (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996), higher educational aspirations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), greater levels of academic integration into the university (Milem & Berger, 1997), and increased feelings of affirmation, confidence, and self-worth (Kuh, 1995). Finally, faculty benefit from OCC with students in that increased student-faculty OCC is linked to higher teaching evaluations (Jaasma and Koper 1999, p.41)"*

Furthermore, as mentioned by Jaasma and Koper, the perception that their instructor is empathic toward their situation is a predictor of student satisfaction with OCC (1999, p.42). According to Myers (2004, p.134), "when instructors exemplify the qualities of character (i.e. kind, virtuous, good) and caring (i.e. empathic, understanding, responsive), students report a greater likelihood of communicating with them," which Myers argues leads to the creation of a positive working environment. The benefits of a positive student/faculty member relationship are clear; however on the other hand a negative relationship can have an immensely negative impact upon the motivation of a student (Komarrju 2010; Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie 2009; Pearson 2012,



p.188). The quality of the interaction between students and faculty is also emphasised by Tinto (1993) who argued that simply developing a connection with others is not sufficient, "students need to feel connected in ways that do not marginalise or ghettoize...they need to feel welcomed not threatened."

However, for many students, developing a relationship with a faculty member may be a difficult step. Kelly, Keaten and Finch (2004) found that the anxiety created by face to face contact with a faculty member caused reticent students to communicate with faculty almost exclusively using computer channels of communication. This suggests that for the more reticent students within the student body, developing a personal relationship with the tertiary institution may be more difficult than for non-reticent students. However, these challenges also exist for international students and students from ethnic backgrounds, who may be less confident approaching faculty members for support. As stated by Komarrju (2010, p.340), the increasing diversity of student bodies requires faculty members to "consciously reach out to ethnic minority students who may not find it easy to approach them."

An interesting finding from Jaasma and Koper (1999) suggests that a breakdown in trust can arise between students and faculty members, following disclosure of personal problems from students. As found by Jaasma and Koper (1999, p.45), "trust was negatively correlated to the discussion of personal problems during informal contact." Jaasma and Koper (1999, p.46) offer a potential explanation, mentioning that "the student who is having a problem may be reluctant to speak with the instructor because either the instructor has identified a problem the student is having or the student senses a problem related to his/her work. In either case, interacting with the instructor about this problem (and perhaps about personal problems that might be related) may diminish trust in the instructor and

motivation in the student." This raises a key challenge for students, in deciding whether or not to disclose sensitive personal information to faculty members. Furthermore, this underscores fears (which are either justifiable or not) that disclosure of personal issues to faculty members will impact negatively upon the students progression through university. For example, Schwenk (2010, p.1181) referred to Givens and Tjia (2002), Chew-Graham, Rogers and Yassin (2003) and Rosal et al. (1997), who found that students were concerned that revealing their mental illness might have a negative impact upon their education. Such concerns which a student may harbour, could act as a significant barrier to help seeking, particularly if the student perceives faculty staff as being the only people within the university who can assist with personal problems.

### **Support Services and Student Retention**

The value of a positive relationship between the student and faculty member is clear. However, the potential difficulties that can arise for the staff member and student, when the student turns to the staff member for advice on personal problems, necessitates the existence of access points on campus which are removed from the students' faculty, where the student is able to seek help.

This raises the value of a well resourced, campus based counselling service, particularly with regard to students who may be experiencing mental health issues that are impacting upon their study, and jeopardizing their place within the university. Importantly, campus based counselling centres allow students to develop links with figures within the university, while also ensuring that mental health issues which place them at risk of dropping out, can be treated. Simpson and Ferguson (2012, p.3) refer to Wilson et al. (1997), who found that as the number of counselling sessions attended by a student increased, as did the likelihood of student retention (up to six

sessions). This is not an isolated finding, with numerous studies demonstrating strong links between student retention and the attendance of sessions with campus based counsellors (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995; Turner and Barry, 2000; Bishop and Brenneman, 1986; Illovisky, 1997; Wilson, Mason and Ewing, 1997; Lee, Olsen, Locke, Michaelson and Odes, 2009). This highlights the importance of university counselling centres in assisting student retention; however this also highlights the finding from Stallman (2012) that clients of Australian counselling centres on campus receive 2.9 sessions on average, compared with 6.2 in the United States.

Further evidence suggests that counselling centres on Australian university campuses are significantly under-resourced (Stallman 2012, p.252). The International Student Counsellors Association (Gallagher 2009) recommends that the counsellor to student ratio on campus should be in the vicinity of 1:1,500 – 1:2,000. Stallman (2012, p.252) found that within Australian universities, the counsellor to student ratio was 1:4,340. This finding is supported by Downs (2008), who reported that this ratio was 1:4,957 in 2008. These figures indicate significant under-staffing of Australian counselling centres on campus, as opposed to the United States, where the counsellor to student ratio is 1:1,527 (Gallagher 2009). This impacts upon the capacity of counselling centres on Australian campuses to reach out to a greater number of students, and conduct longer and more meaningful interventions with students. Although it should be noted that although the student to counsellor ratio in the United States is within the range of acceptable standards, the student attrition rate within the higher education institutions in the United States is much higher than in Australia. This suggests that simply increasing the number of counsellors on campus is not sufficient to improve overall student retention.

The costs of student attrition are significant for the university, and can be ameliorated to an extent by a well resourced counselling centre. Simpson and Ferguson (2012, p.3) refer to data from Adams et al. (2010), who estimated that the annual cost to the university for students who exit their course earlier than planned is \$17,000 (international) and \$14,000 (local). Adams et al. (2010) calculated the cost of student attrition to a single university as being \$36 million in one year. Referring to US statistics, Osberg (2004) determined that if a counsellor, whose position costs the university \$40,000 per year, is able to support 3 students who are at risk of dropping out of tertiary study, then that counsellor will have nullified the cost of their role, as borne by the university. These statistics do not take into account further costs to the university, such as the maintenance and utilisation of office space, however there is an indication that through reducing student attrition, counsellors can also act to reduce the amount of revenue lost to the higher education institution. Furthermore, Bishop (2010, p.251) and Kadison and Geronimo (2004), argue that universities not providing adequate services to support the mental health of students could be at a disadvantage when attempting to attract prospective students, which could in turn have an impact upon revenue.

As a result, funding a counselling service to an adequate level, which ensures that counsellor to student ratios do not exceed recommended standards may be a prudent economic decision for higher education institutions. Counselling of students has been directly related to improved student retention, while at the same time, the presence of strong support systems can be valuable in attracting prospective students. The presence of a well resourced counselling centre on campus can be critical in ensuring that students are provided with necessary support to persevere with their studies.



### The College Student Role

While this paper contends that the creation of a caring environment where students are well supported and have access to counselling is important for student retention, others argue that the onus is on the student to adjust to the expectations of the higher education institution (Collier and Morgan 2008; Wolf-Wendel et al. 2009; Tinto 1993). According to Collier and Morgan (2008, p.426), for students who are at risk of non-completion, whether they be first generation students, students from an ethnic background or students with disabilities, learning to play the role of the higher education student is essential to academic success. Collier and Morgan (2008, p.426) contend that implicit to this role, is the capacity to understand the expectations of the institution and faculty, and how to “apply their academic skills effectively to those expectations.” For ‘traditional students’ (i.e. students from a family with a history of higher education completion), becoming ‘role experts’ is relatively easy as they have the resources at their disposal which enable them to comply with these expectations (Collier and Morgan 2008, p.439). For first generation students, mastery of this role is more challenging; though remains critical in ensuring that they are able to remain in their program beyond first year. Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009, p.425) consider that for students to develop a ‘sense of belonging’, they “must learn and adopt the norms of the campus culture.” Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009, p.424) refer to Tinto (1993), who contended that for students from ethnic backgrounds, playing the role of the tertiary student may lead to a compromising situation:

*“Hispanic students have to know how to play by the rules of the institution, what values exist and how to negotiate that world. It doesn’t mean that they have to become White – but they have to be conversant with the rules of the*

*game. There is some sense of having to play the role...It isn’t you; it’s the role you play. That is the difficult part... how to conserve a sense of who you are while you are playing this other role.”*

Tierney (1999, p.80) provides a strident critique of Tinto (1993), stating that this encourages students to engage in “cultural suicide.” According to Tierney (1999, p.80), “With its implicit suggestions that such students must assimilate into the cultural mainstream and abandon their ethnic identities to succeed on predominantly White campuses, Tinto’s framework is faulted not only for overlooking the history of ethnic oppression and discrimination in the United States, but also for being theoretically flawed.”

Rather, Tierney (1999, p.89) proposes that the model of student integration “should contend that students of colour on predominantly White campuses be able to affirm, rather than reject, who they are. Campuses that adopt this model will not be sites of assimilation but, instead, sites of contestation and multiple interpretations. Individuals on these campuses will not struggle over the presently static model of culture but over more fluid and dynamic notions.” Tierney’s contention that the development of a model which welcomes diversity, recognises that a sense of belonging, which is so critical to student success and retention, will be difficult to attain if the student feels as though they are required to compromise who they are, in order to fit in to the campus culture. A rigid campus culture which fails to recognise the increasing diversity of the student body, will subsequently experience challenges with student attrition.

### Conclusion

Student attrition has genuine repercussions: lost revenue for the higher education institution, the subsequent misappropriation of funds from state and federal governments, the weakening of the labour market and potential

exclusion of young, low-skilled workers from employment. This paper has identified students at risk of non-completion as including part time students, first year students and first generation students. Furthermore, a poor reflection upon colleges and universities is the fact that students with disabilities, students experiencing mental health challenges and students from ethnic backgrounds are also at risk of non completion. For students, feeling rejected and not being able to develop a sense of belonging within higher education is a key cause of student attrition. This paper has referred to research which suggests that this could be due to the inability of the student to perform the 'college student role'. However this paper suggests that it is the higher education institution, which must seek to create a welcoming environment, where care, warmth and acceptance are promoted, in order to achieve improved student retention.

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