**Interpreting Educational Research**

**Major Paper: DRAFT Outline**

I am interested in retention of students. I believe retention must be addressed by intra-institutional strategic planning, in a holistic, culturally knowledgeable and culturally sensitive manner. Specifically, I am interested in identifying key, controllable, retention factors, and building a superior retention strategy for students attending postsecondary institutions.

**Introduction**

Significance of retention:

In the global marketplace

To post-secondary institutions.

To culturally under-represented groups

To students, particularly under-represented students

Defining terms: retention, student success

Thesis statement: Effective retention strategies (a retention model?) may be developed by focussing on realistic entrance requirements, community building, and an awareness of the cultural perspectives that affect student success.

Retention model brief description.

**Background information**

Pertinent studies on postsecondary student retention

Student development: Chickering, Astin, Tinto

The significance of preparedness.

Academic

Emotional, developmental (illustrated by vocational preparedness?)

Academic-related remedial programming

Catching up on the fly: Remedial courses to address weaknesses

The value of small.

Student-faculty interactions: what is useful, what is not useful.

The value of small group learning.

The Residence connection: summary of general findings

The value of building community

Living-Learning Environments and their impact

**Discussion**

Restate thesis with pertinent elaboration

The model (the Administration’s responsibility):

Enrollment management: including finding a good match

Ensuring academic preparedness

Recruiting appropriately

Effectively Small?

Remedial assistance

Enhancing connections, community, interaction

Measuring intelligently

**Examining the Holy Grail of Retention**

Retention at all costs?

**Conclusions**

Examining the holy grail of retention

Retention at all costs**?**

Re-evaluating the meaning of Student Success

Retention model can be distilled down to:

Strategic recruitment/enrolment

Recruiting to strengths

Operating to strengths: re size

Tutoring and mentoring

Interaction opportunities/building community

For Residents

For Commuters

**Building an Effective Retention Model: A Comparative Examination of Post-secondary Retention Factors**

The Federal Government of Canada’s 2001 report “Canada’s Innovation Agenda” stimulated discussion on the role of universities in relation to our national competitiveness in the global marketplace (Madgett & Belanger, 2008, p. 77). Our competitive ability in the international marketplace is partially dependent upon our ability to graduate increasing numbers of students (Madgett & Belanger, 2008, p. 77). Interestingly, this problem is not ours alone, a recent survey of 1200 CEOs in 69 countries reports that 66% of these CEO’s foresee a shortage of skilled employees as post-depression hiring resumes (PwC, 2011). It is noteworthy that the topic of postsecondary student retention is not only a student concern and an institutional concern, but it is also a concern that affects the global economy and our national presence in an ever-shrinking marketplace.

Producing more graduates is usually accomplished by a combination of two strategies: improving accessibility, and improving the graduation percentage of admitted students: in other words: admit more students, and help them along when they encounter roadblocks. In the postsecondary education paradigm student retention can be described by the measure of the percentage of students who, once attending an institution, eventually graduate from the institution. The topic of student retention is taken very seriously by most North American post-secondary institutions: universities and colleges are committing an increasingly large proportion of their human and financial resources to the goal of assisting students in their journey towards successful completion of their degree or diploma. Institutions have discovered that it is less expensive to keep students than it is to recruit students, and in the competitive postsecondary marketplace, students are the key to continued funding of not only academic resources, but additionally, ancillary services solvency: the bookstore, the residence, the food services operation, parking, and other revenue dependent services and ventures.

While access to post-secondary education opportunities has increased over the last few decades, this access does not guarantee persistence through the degree program (Cragg, 2009, p. 394). Graduation rates in the U.S. are approximately 50% (Madgett & Belanger, 2008, p. 77), and there is no reason to believe Canadian numbers differ. Macleans magazine, as part of their annual ranking of Canadian universities, report first-year to second-year retention rates range from a low of 70.3% at Brandon University (Manitoba) to a high of 95% at Queens University in Ontario (Macleans, 2011).

Despite a great deal of retention-related research, there is still significant variation in graduation rates that this extensive research has not yet explained (Cragg, K., 2009, p. 395).

The purpose of this research paper is to examine retention-related research in a critical manner, distilling from the many retention-enhancing theories the core process(es) or properties that positively affect student retention. This study will show that the core retention-enhancing strategies are, despite the plethora of often contradicting research, essentially based upon only two variables that the university can affect: admission criteria and interaction. With a small, publicly funded, retention-challenged postsecondary institution in mind, these two criteria will form the basis of a retention model that will be explained in detail.

**Background**

In examining the question of why some postsecondary institutions retain students at a higher rate than others, the matter of what happens to students when they arrive at university and what continues to happen to them during their academic career, their “student development”, needs to be understood. Arthur Chickering’s landmark 1969 psychosocial theory of student development introduced the notion that during their college years students develop along seven vectors, or directions, each being influenced by environmental components of the postsecondary institution that they attend (Chickering, undated). Alexander Astin’s theory of student involvement states that student learning is directly influenced by the amount of involvement they have in both the academic and the social aspects of their postsecondary institution (Richmond, Jayne, 1986, p. 92). Vincent Tinto’s theory of student development advances that students arrive with intentions and commitments, which are continually modified due to interactions between the individual and the structures, staff, requirements, and social systems of the institution (Terenzini, P., 1987, p. 29). Tinto’s theory of student development precedes his theory of student attrition, which states that students depart without graduating due to too many negative encounters with the institution’s academic and social systems (Terenzini, P., 1987, p. 29).

Readiness for postsecondary education is a well-researched theme in the retention discussion. Focussing on first-generation postsecondary students, researchers Reid & Moore explored, in a qualitative study, the attitudes and perceptions of 13 first-generation college students, and made recommendations to education stakeholders. Social capital theory states strong social and academic support networks are successful for successful transition from high school to university (Reid & Moore, 2008, p. 259). According to this study, first-generation college students are disadvantaged because there is no-one at home who has experienced postsecondary education, and therefore they lack a valuable information resource. The authors recommend that first-generation students should be identified and be subjected to extra support and guidance (Reid & Moore, 2009, p. 259). Still in the preparedness paradigm, emotional intelligence (EI) and its impact upon retention was examined by Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke, & Wood, in a 2006 study. This carefully crafted, quantitative study, involving first-year students at a small university in Ontario, found that students with higher emotional intelligence, comprised of intrapersonal ability, interpersonal ability, adaptability, and stress management ability (p. 1332), have a higher retention rate than students with lower EI scores (Parker et al, 2006, p.1334).

Of course, there are more “concrete” aspects to preparedness, such as exposure and commitment to study skill expertise in high school. Jansen & Suhre, in a 2010 Dutch study, postulate stress is a significant drop-out factor for first-year university students, and they examined whether pre-university study skill acquisition reduces stress in the first year of postsecondary study, and whether this has a positive effect on retention (Jansen & Shhre, 2010, p. 570). Their hypothesis was proved correct: time management and learning skills preparation translated into a higher percentage of retained students between year one and year two of law school (Jansen & Suhre, 2010, p. 576).

Some studies have found the most reliable predictor of postsecondary student academic performance is superior academic performance in secondary school. An Australian study by Mills, Hayworth, Rosenwax, Carr, & Rosenberg, (2009) makes this argument. According to Mills et al, high matriculation score (secondary school academic performance) is the most significant factor affecting retention in the postsecondary institution’s health science program (pp. 206, 207, 213).

Unfortunately, not all students arrive at university or college academically prepared, and many postsecondary institutions have developed a variety of strategies to address their shortfall. In fact, approximately 95% of U.S. 4-year institutions have at least one remedial program to assist struggling students (Jamelske, E., 2009, p. 375). Most popular among remedial strategies are the first-year experience (FYE) programs. FYE programs are designed to facilitate a smooth academic and social transition for students embarking on their postsecondary academic journey. There is a wide variety of FYE programs, ranging from highly organized learning communities to more basic courses introducing students to postsecondary school life (Jamelske, E., 2009, p. 374). In terms of retention, results describing the effect of FYE programming is mixed, most probably due to the wide variety of strategies implemented in a wide variety of institutions: large vs. small, urban vs. suburban/rural (Jamelske, E., 2009, p. 374). Results of one FYE program introduced at a Midwestern U.S. university indicated students generally benefited from the program, however, there was not enough value realized to justify the annual cost of $237,000 (Jamelske, E., 2009, p. 374). This particular program featured curricular and extracurricular components added to core courses in order to facilitate student integration into university life. No statistical correlation was found between the efforts of the institution and increased student retention, however more encouraging results were found in comparing the GPAs of FYE program individual courses with the GPAs of non participants (Jamelske, E., 2009, p. 385-387). Also noteworthy, students entering university with lower than average academic credentials were affected most positively by participation in the FYE program (Jamelske, E., 2009, p.373).

These results are mirrored in a research study looking at psycho-socio factors as they affect student retention. The researchers found that higher functioning students experience stress in the same manner and magnitude as lower functioning students, and the difference in how stress impacts their academic performance is in the learned resourcefulness of the higher functioning students. Lower functioning students feel stress is impacting them more negatively, and feel less comfortable in the university environment (Kennett & Pettis, 2001, in Kennett & Reed, 2009, p. 154). A FYE program specifically geared towards helping students increase their efficacy in library skills, writing skills, reading and understanding research articles, essay planning, dealing with stress, and other academic instruction aimed at addressing their perceived weaknesses (Kennett & Reed, 2009, p. 159). Students that were most disadvantaged in terms of impulse control, attentiveness, and anxiety benefited most from the remedial program ((Kennett & Reed, 2009, p. 163).

Clearly, great care needs to be taken in the design and implementation of FYE programming if retention is to be supported.

Retention, often used synonymously with “student success”, is a term that speaks to the institution’s perspective more than the student’s perspective: few students would be pleased to be described as “retained”, while most would be pleased to be regarded as successful.

. This retention model will include all effective practices available to increase student retention in a cost-effective and efficient manner.

References

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