

Enrolment management, the external environment and the commitment of the institution to student welfare: Outcomes of rumination

Respondent

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The special theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation, and Development* titled *Recruitment, Retention, and Placement: Progressing the Knowledge Economy* demonstrates a fervent concern for student success. Student success transpires in eight domains (Braxton, forthcoming): academic attainment, acquisition of general education, development of academic competence, development of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions, occupation attainment, preparation for adulthood and citizenship, personal accomplishments, and personal development. Although persistence and graduation constitute specific markers in the domain of academic attainment, student persistence functions as an important gateway to student success as student departure forecloses the possibility of both individual student and institutional attainment of these eight domains of student success (Braxton, forthcoming). Moreover, the college choice process plays an important role in both persistence and the range of success students experience while attending an institution of higher education. The article by Yang describing the college choice process for Chinese students exemplifies this role. The six articles of this special issue acknowledge the importance of recruitment and persistence in the achievement of student success. Indeed, student success along the lines of the eight domains looms important for “progressing” a knowledge economy.

In the “Introduction” to this special issue, the guest editors provide a need for “stronger integration among the processes of recruitment, retention, and placement” as a rationale for this special issue. They also note that recruitment, retention, and placement are frequently viewed as separate elements. The notion of enrolment management provides an organising perspective for the integration of the processes of recruitment, retention, and placement. Hossler and Bean (1990) posit that wielding control over the size and characteristics of institutional student enrolments form the goals for enrolment management. Enrolment management includes both processes and activities that involve the whole institution (Kemerer, Baldrige, & Green, 1982). These activities and processes entail both the recruitment and retention of students (Hossler & Bean). These activities and processes also focus on student outcomes of college attendance. Enrolment management requires what Hossler and Bean (p. 17) call a “wide-angle lens,” a

lens that sees the whole college experience. Such a “wide-angle lens” requires integration among the processes of recruitment, retention, and placement as called for by the Guest Editors of this special issue. The articles of this issue address these processes.

Two other notions emerge from ruminations on the articles of this special issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation, and Development*. These two notions are the importance of the role of the external environment and the demonstration of institutional commitment to the welfare of its students.

The external environment

Several articles describe the characteristics of students enrolled in Australian institutions of higher learning. These student characteristics strongly indicate that the external environment plays a major role in their persistence. More specifically, Hinton indicates that about 25 percent of the students enrolled at Central Queensland University are females with dependants and of these students nearly a half are single parents. Trott also notes that adult learners comprise the majority of students enrolled in Australian universities. Moreover, Taylor and Lawrence note that 81 percent of the students enrolled in the University of South Queensland pursue their studies in distance or online learning formats. Taylor and Lawrence also cite 2003 figures provided by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee that indicate that more than 70 percent of full-time students also work while enrolled in courses.

These characteristics indicate that the majority of students enrolled in Australian universities work while pursuing their studies. Some of these students also have dependent children. Thus, such students have other obligations apart from their university studies. These obligations largely define their daily activities (Webb, 1990). Put differently, students fitting these descriptions are commuting students.

Without the support of such significant others as spouses and children, departure from the university may result for such students (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005).

Ways to encourage the support of spouses of commuting students include providing physical space on campus for students to study and type papers (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The provision of such a space would ease the burden such course-related activities place on spouses and dependent children. Such a space should also be open in the evenings and on weekends. Another recommendation focuses on the scheduling of courses at a range of times to fit the schedules of students who work and have family obligations. Child care services should also be provided by universities to ease the burden of familial obligations (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon). In addition to these recommendations, orientation programs for new students should also include spouses or life partners (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon).

Because such students seldom live on campus in university residence halls, their primary identification with their university comes from their academic experiences with their university (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon). The articles by Hinton and Trott provide guidance on enhancing the academic experiences of commuting students with obligations of work and family. Hinton points out the need to chart the timing of course assignments of students enrolled in more than one science course at a time. Trott expresses concern for adult students enrolled in courses with recent “school leavers.” Trott reports the findings of a case study of a course that

utilises the skills and life experiences of mature age students. In this course, such students are encouraged to assume a leading role in the course. Trott reports that recent ‘school leavers’ benefited from experience with the motivation, depth of life experiences and knowledge of mature learners.

Beyond the suggestions of Hinton and Trott, student-centered methods of instruction and learning communities provide additional mechanisms for fostering the learning experiences of commuting students. Tinto (2005) suggests such student-centered pedagogical practices as active learning and collaborative and cooperative learning as these practices encourage the active involvement of students in their learning. Active learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and collaborative and cooperative learning (Blumberg, 2000) also enhance student learning. Through these positive learning experiences students develop a commitment to their college or university. This commitment, in turn, increases the likelihood of their persistence (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004).

Tinto (2005) also recommends the development of learning communities. Learning communities entail the block scheduling of courses to enable the same group of students to take a set of courses together (Tinto, 1997). Optimally, a theme should underlie the courses that make up the set. Research tends to show that participation in learning communities influences student persistence in a positive manner (Tinto, 1997). Universities that serve primarily commuting students should develop learning communities.

Commitment of the institution to student welfare

In their ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report titled *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure* (2004), Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon posit that an institution’s commitment to the welfare of its students plays a positive role in college student persistence. This notion manifests itself as an institution’s abiding concern for the growth and development of its students. An institution committed to the welfare of its students also clearly communicates the high value it places on students in groups as well as individuals. Equitable treatment of students and respect for them as individuals constitute additional aspects of this construct (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). This construct emerged through a process of inductive theory construction from the findings of research. Inductive theory construction involves the generation of new concepts, patterns of understanding, and generalisations from the findings of empirical research (Wallace, 1971). Moreover, research also supports the influence of this construct in the student persistence process (Hirschy, 2004).

Commitment of the institution to student welfare stands as an organisational characteristic that university administrators, faculty, and staff shape through their decisions and actions. In their article McKavanaugh and Purnell call attention to the finding of a study of 2,995 institutions conducted by Habley and McClanahan (2004). Habley and McClanahan report that collegiate institutions tend to attribute student attrition more to student characteristics than to institutional characteristics. As an institutional characteristic, student perceptions of the commitment of their institution to student welfare serve to shift some onus for student persistence to the values, attitudes, actions, and decisions of the institution.

This organisational construct resonates with Hermanowicz’s concept of “enforced success” (2003). He derived this concept from case studies of four highly selective

research universities with varying retention rates. The university with the highest retention rate has what Hermanowicz terms a culture of enforced success. In such a culture all students are treated as if they are at-risk. Moreover, key people believe fervently in the promise of each student.

The efforts described in the articles by McKavanaugh and Purnell and by Taylor and Lawrence provide practical examples of ways universities demonstrate their commitment to the welfare of their students. In their article McKavanaugh and Purnell describe the development of an instrument titled the “Student Readiness Questionnaire (SRQ).” The purpose of the SRQ is to identify entering students who are at-risk at Central Queensland University, Australia. McKavanaugh and Purnell indicate that the SRQ will also be used to select various intervention strategies.

Likewise the online support system for students given academic warnings described by Taylor and Lawrence also demonstrates an institutional commitment to the welfare of its students. The Academic Warning and Reflection Exercise (AWARE) was developed to accommodate distance learning students at the University of South Queensland, Australia. This online program is available to students twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. AWARE assist students in identifying their reasons for academic difficulty and assists them in using relevant university resources and services.

Both the SRQ and AWARE demonstrate an abiding concern for the growth and development of students. They also show the high value the two universities place on their students.

In addition to these two articles, Hinton’s identification of the need to chart the timing of course assignments of students enrolled in more than one science course at a time also shows an abiding concern for the growth and development of students. Likewise, Trott’s description of course that utilises the skills and life experiences of mature age students provides an example of a course design that exhibits a concern for student growth and development. Both the Hinton and Trott articles also provide examples of how universities can communicate the high value they place on their students.

Although the above articles indicate practical ways universities demonstrate their commitment to the welfare of their students, additional ways come in the form of imperatives for university administrators, faculty members and staff to follow in the performance of their organisational roles (Braxton, 2006). Since commitment of the institution to the welfare of its student embodies the cultural values of a college or university, their day-to-day enactment requires little or no direct financial costs. These six imperatives take the following form (Braxton).

1. Administrators, faculty, staff members, and clerical workers should adopt a commitment to safeguarding the welfare of students as clients of the institution. Such a commitment entails the communication to students that they are highly valued members of the campus community.
2. Students should receive equitable and fair treatment in the day-to-day administration of institutional policies and procedures by university administrators, faculty members, staff members, and clerical workers.
3. The day-to-day interactions university administrators, faculty and staff have with students should display respect for each student as an individual. In

particular, staff members and clerical workers in offices that have frequent contact with students should display such respect.

4. The university's reward structure for administrators, staff members, and clerical workers should attach importance to those individuals who highly value students, treat students equitably, and demonstrate respect for students as individuals in their day-to-day work. Such behaviours should receive appropriate weight in the allocation of such institutional rewards as annual reappointment, promotion and annual salary increases.
5. The university's publications and documents should communicate, when appropriate, the institution's steadfast concern for the growth and development of its students.
6. Public speeches made by the president, chief academic officer, chief student affairs officer, academic deans and admissions officers should communicate the high value their university places on students as members of the academic community.

College and university administrators, staff members and clerical workers who follow these eight imperatives in their day-to-day work provide students with opportunities to observe the reinforcement of the core organisational value of the commitment of the institution to the welfare of its students.

University administrators, faculty members, staff members and clerical workers who follow these six imperatives contribute to institutional efforts to reduce college student departure. Steadfast adherence to these six imperatives also augments the success of programs and activities designed by the institution to reduce student departure such as those described in the articles included in this special issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*.

Concluding thoughts

Enrolment management coupled with a wide-angle lens perspective affords a powerful organising framework for the recruitment, retention, and placement of students. Enrolment management practices of universities must acknowledge the role of the external environment in the persistence of students who commute and work while pursuing their university studies. The practices described in this article as well as in other articles of this special issue acknowledge the role of the external environment and offer ways to help commuting, working students adjust to the academic demands of a university.

A commitment of the institution to the welfare of its students should also permeate the activities and processes of enrolment management. Articles of this special issue as well as the current article offer ways in which a university can demonstrate its commitment to the welfare of its students.

Enrolment management practices that recognise the important role of the external environment in the persistence of commuting, working students and demonstrate an institution's commitment to the welfare of its students contribute to student success needed to "progress" a knowledge economy. Such student success transcends student persistence to include such domains of student success as the development of academic competence, development of cognitive skills and

intellectual dispositions, occupation attainment, and preparation for adulthood and citizenship (Braxton, forthcoming).

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