

Postsecondary Retention and Completion: Establishing Unity in a Diverse College Classroom

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Abstract

Postsecondary retention and degree completion in United States' colleges and universities pose a challenge for educating a society that is globally competitive. This article focuses on legislative concerns, college administrative policies and characteristics of competent and skilled instructors to promote unity in the diverse college classroom. Effective retention and completion programs on the national, state and university level are extremely important, but it all begins in the classroom with master teachers who are approachable and supportive in each student's quest for program completion. Dialogue among all invested parties must continue in order for all students to be better educated, trained, and prepared to meet the goals of a demanding economic society and labor market. Understanding student diversity, strengths and weaknesses while providing a positive and interactive instructional environment promotes postsecondary retention and degree completion of competent, well-educated individuals.

Introduction

Retention and degree completion of students in postsecondary institutions pose ongoing challenges for colleges and universities. Legislative policies have focused on holding institutions accountable for successful degree completion. The Obama administration (2013) initiated a call to action for all schools involved in higher learning to develop national retention strategies for degree completion in order to attain global competitiveness. The United States ranks ninth in the world for the proportion of young adults attending college and sixteenth in the world for the number of certificates and degrees awarded within a six year period. Those students who attain degree completion are mostly from higher-income families while only about 25% of lower-income students reach this goal (2013). This attainment gap is substantial and needs to be addressed on all levels of education. President Barack Obama said, “If we want America to lead in the 21st century, nothing is more important than giving everyone the best education possible – from the day they start pre-school to the day they start their career” (2013).

According to the American Council of Education (ACE), two-thirds of all jobs will require postsecondary education on some level by the year 2018 (Sandeen, 2013). This paper will address ways of attaining that goal. Learner-centered classrooms led by master teachers who understand and promote instructional and interactive learning environments will ultimately produce an educated populace and a progressive society. Inclusion of effective classroom strategies, along with university policies and legislative initiatives will narrow the attainment gap and emphasize the value of degree completion.

Perspectives on University Promotion and Completion Efforts

At the university level, conferences, workshops, committees, and task forces are established to address issues facing current and future students. Presently, in postsecondary schools, traditional students (18-22 year olds) are a minority with approximately three-fourths of students considered as non-traditional (40% are over 25 years old) and that number is predicted to grow (2013). They work full-time, raise children, serve in the military or fulfill other obligations outside the classroom. Because non-traditional students are older, they come into postsecondary programs with prior knowledge and experiences that need consideration. They also may come with confusing transcripts from years of study without degree attainment (2013). These students look to instructors and school officials to provide guidance and support to help them successfully complete their chosen programs of study.

One example of a strategy suggested to promote retention and degree completion is Kalsbeek's 4P (profile, progress, process, promise) framework (Kalsbeek, 2013).

1. Profile: Average ACT or SAT scores of the freshman class may predict the successful completion rate of students over a six-year period. Most students who drop out do so at the end of their freshman year. Therefore, the identification of at-risk students is essential and becomes the target group for retention and enrollment in a second year and continues until programs are completed in a timely manner.
2. Progress: Student progress from successful completion of each year's work should be analyzed and measured. Most institutions follow student diligence to continue in school instead of looking at progress made. Courses with high failure and/or withdrawal rates

should be reassessed, and possibly redesigned, as part of the retention strategy. Without this data, high-risk students remain in danger of dropping out.

3. Process: Providing students with competent advisors who help develop individual courses of study and direct those in need of financial aid to the right sources provide a comfort level needed to proceed toward degree completion. Kalsbeek stated, “... the causes of attrition may rest more on high-risk experiences and encounters that impact the many than some inherent high-risk student attributes that characterize the few” (2013, p. 11).

4. Promise: Students enter college with expectations of degree completion and support from the institutions they have chosen. Natural attrition will occur, but institutional retention strategies must be in place to support those who proceed toward their goals of attaining degrees.

The 4P outline connects students with administrative policies, institutional promises and academic progress. All four components are important and focus on the student. Another connection goes directly to individual classrooms where unity and community are established. The next section will address the significance of instructors in university student success.

Perspectives of Instructors in Student Success

Kohn said, “The purpose of education is to produce good people, not just good students” (Hardin, 2012, p. 140). Teachers who believe in this concept build classroom communities of mutual learning, sharing, and respect. When students are included in the decision making process and allowed to share personal experiences, likes and dislikes of

college life, expectations, and goals, the classroom is transformed into a place of acceptance and functionality.

Steps in building classroom unity begin before the syllabus is introduced. Instructors may initiate classroom climate activities within the first minutes of instruction in the semester. The unexpected question, “What do you enjoy about college classes?” is asked and wait time given. A few students may answer and then others join in until many are involved and sharing. In a follow-up question, students are asked about a place to go where calm replaces stress. Common answers may include bookstore or library, coffee house, garden, park, church, and Grandma’s house. The discussion continues with how classrooms can be altered to replicate and foster these reflective environments. Instantly, the classroom becomes a community of learners getting to know each other in comfortable surroundings. Thus, the stage is set for learning to occur. Individual instructors using informal instructional strategies can hold great promise for initiating a place for students to establish a sense of belonging. Ultimately, this sense of belonging may have a positive impact on student academic success.

Another strategy involves asking students to provide insight into professor qualities that offer the most inviting and effective learning environments. These qualities are posted and discussed. Out of 30 characteristics, each one is ranked on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being extremely important. An unofficial Likert scale survey of four Instructional Strategies classes that included 114 students revealed the following:

Table 1: Most Likeable Teacher Characteristics

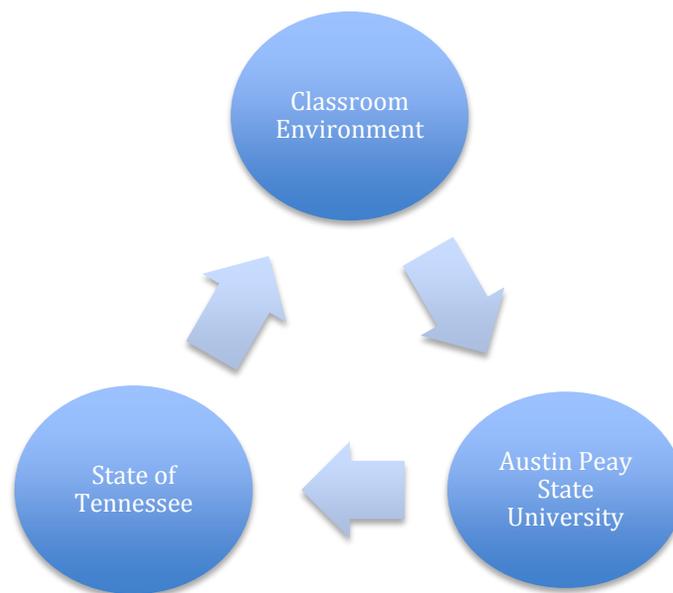
Top Ten	Number of Respondents
1. Enthusiasm/attitude of professor	99
2. One-on-one support/approachable	96
3. Clear/realistic expectations	95
4. Knowledgeable advisors	86
5. Obvious passion for teaching	81
6. Well-organized	76
7. Reasonable workload	74
8. Grades returned with constructive feedback	73
9. Response to emails/phone messages in a timely manner	69
10. Students treated equally; no teacher's pets	67

The results were somewhat surprising, especially number one, enthusiasm and attitude of the professor. Upon reflection, the teacher is the one who sets the mood and establishes the climate for learning. Purkey asserted, "Effective teachers let students know they are *somebody*, not *some body*" (Fredericks, 2005). Establishing a community of diverse learners who feel comfortable and enjoy a sense of self-efficacy is essential to effective learning and pedagogical instruction.

Connecting the Dots in the State of Tennessee

Politicians, university officials and classroom instructors who are invested in successful postsecondary retention programs inform and are informed by each other. An example of this type of investment is explained in this section.

Figure 1. Promoting Completion Through Cooperation



On the national level, Tennessee ranks 42nd for graduating students from college in four years (20%) and six years (46%). Only 16% of Tennessee’s high school seniors are considered fully prepared for college, according to ACT scores (2012).

On the state level, Tennessee implemented The Complete College Tennessee Act, (CCTA) to reform public higher education (2010). The agenda included changes in fiscal, academic, and administrative policies to be incorporated at the institutional and state levels. The Act suggested that Tennesseans should be better educated, trained, and prepared to meet the goals of a demanding economic society and labor market. The focus is on quality assurance and distinguishing factors of each diverse institution. This

projected national education accomplishment is for Tennessee to reach these goals by the year 2025. A new Performance Funding policy is in place to evaluate degree levels, student population dynamics, and established programs (2011). This plan replaces the former enrollment-based formula and was developed with the Lumina Group of Indianapolis which is committed to increasing college educated Americans.

Suggested advantages of CCTA (2010):

- Focuses on student success and efficiency to degree completion.
- Increases awareness and importance of graduation rates.
- Promotes a performance-based formula that could become a national model for improved degree productivity.
- Emphasizes better articulation with community colleges.
- Recognizes faculty and academic departments concerning the critical importance of advising and providing student support until degree completion.

Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN has become a frontrunner in succeeding with this formula. In the second year of using the CCTA formula, APSU state funding increased by 1.3% over the former enrollment based formula (2012).

In addition, the following programs are in place at APSU to increase retention and graduation rates of accomplished students:

- Degree Compass

Based on systems such as Netflix, Amazon, and Pandora, Degree Compass uses predictable analytical software to pair students with courses that best fit their programs of study, talents, and curriculum.

- Structures Learning Assistance

Enhanced courses are provided to those with low ACT/SAT or COMPASS scores needing assistance to successfully complete core classes of mathematics, English and history.

- Academic Alert

An early alert system, Academic Alert is a web-based program used by professors to notify students of academic concerns. The Office of Academic Alert staff notifies the student of the professor's concerns (examples: poor attendance, late or missing assignments, low test and/or quiz grades) and offers support and recommendations for improvement.

- Academic Support Center

The Academic Support Center offers free tutoring to students needing assistance in all subjects.

- Next Generation Learning Challenges Breakthrough Models Incubator (BMI)

BMI is an inaugural national grant of \$150,000 issued to seven U.S. universities in hopes of increasing the graduation rates of students. This grant is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the League for Innovation in the Community College and is managed by *Educause*, a nonprofit organization.

- Honor Student Incentives

Challenging courses are designed to provide an interdisciplinary approach to learning. Students are encouraged to pursue research and participate in lively classroom discussions. In addition, honors professors are encouraged to

design an interdisciplinary approach to instruction. Honors Certificates are given to students who successfully complete thirty hours of course work with a notation attached to their transcripts. High-achieving students may be invited to become a member of an honors group, the Laurel Wreath Society. Honors students also have access to a space known as Honors Commons where they can commune, study, learn and relax.

- Calls and Emails

Professors are encouraged to stay connected with their students through phone calls and/or email messages, especially when students are struggling academically.

Full Circle Back to the Classroom

When asked to comment about APSU's efforts to provide an environment of learning and support, a senior broadcast media major said, "I know a lot of teachers are doing everything they can to assist us. It's about getting all you can out of your experience" (BI, 9/12). For successful completion to materialize, students must connect real world experiences with prior learning in an interactive learning environment. This strategy, in turn, makes learning more meaningful and allows students to meet and overcome obstacles on their way to degree completion.

In a final analysis, the teacher is the definitive guide who sets the stage for experiential program success. Along with federal, state, and university-supported programs, instructors are responsible for creating effective instructional climates with high expectations for degree completion. Beginning in the classroom and concluding on the platform with degree in hand, student support and administrative policies must

intertwine and complement each other. At Austin Peay State University, the administration, faculty and staff, along with officials at the state level, have formed an effective partnership to raise degree completion rates and support President Obama's call for a more educated, globally competitive society (2013). Implementing quality programs at diverse postsecondary institutions, holding teachers accountable for classroom competency, and understanding changing student dynamics enhances retention and degree completion rates for the increasing number of jobs, presently and in the future, that require more than a high school diploma.

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