

Student Retention and Success: Faculty Initiatives at Middle Tennessee State University

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Abstract

A new age of accountability is emerging at public institutions of higher learning. Beyond attracting students to postsecondary education, colleges and universities are tasked with retaining and graduating students. All institution constituents share the responsibility of enhancing retention and student success. However, faculty members play the single most important role in student learning and may have the greatest impact on student persistence. New faculty initiatives at Middle Tennessee State University reflect a heightened awareness of the University's mission to promote student success and to prepare students to thrive in professional careers in a rapidly changing global society.

Keywords: student retention, student success, faculty initiatives, accountability measures

Literature Review

Why Is Student Success Important?

“The age of accountability is upon colleges” (Seidman, 2005, p. 4). The performance of institutions of higher learning across the nation is gauged primarily by student success, which is defined as the attainment of a desired degree or completion of educational goals allowing the student to achieve long-term personal and career objectives (Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010; Mbuva, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2008). Student success is important to higher education institutions because it validates the accomplishment of the mission to formally educate and prepare students for life-long goals and aspirations (Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2008). Also emerging to the forefront is the concern that the nation's citizenry be prepared to contribute in a dynamic workforce and a global economy. However, Tinto (2006) notes that increased access to higher education is not followed by a greater number of college

graduates, but rather access becomes a revolving door and markedly so for low-income students. Beyond attracting students to postsecondary education and ensuring access to higher education, colleges and universities are tasked with retaining and graduating students to become productive citizens (ACT, 2004; Tinto, 2006).

At a time when financial constraints are increasing in intensity, state and federal policy makers are requiring higher education institutions to monitor and report retention and graduation performance (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009; Noel-Levitz, 2008). “Federal and state policymakers are increasingly using student persistence and graduation rates as measures of institutional effectiveness” (College Board, 2009, p. 2). Higher education is encountering “growing pressure from public policy makers to improve student persistence and graduation rates” (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009, p. 2). These measurements of student success are subsequently used to determine levels of state and federal monetary support. In addition, this metric is used by applicants in the selection process when examining institutional quality. Statistics revealing freshman persistence and graduation rates are prominently presented in *U.S. News and World Report’s Best Colleges in America* (Noel-Levitz, 2008). Therefore, the focus on student retention and graduation rates is currently at a new height of awareness on college campuses throughout the nation (Hossler, Ziskin, Moore III, & Wakhungu, 2008; Tinto, 2006).

What Is Being Done in Higher Education to Promote Student Success?

Research indicates the two most prevalent measures of student success are first-year to second-year retention rates and six-year cohort graduation rates (Noel-Levitz, 2008). However, the terms “student persistence” and “student retention” are used interchangeably in the body of research, and there is no one universal or clearly defined measure of student retention. This makes comparisons across institutions difficult and impedes the evaluation of the various retention efforts (Noel-Levitz, 2008; Stolk, Tiessen, Clift, & Levitt, 2007). Currently, there is a call for more funding of retention initiatives and for more empirically grounded research to adequately assess and report the effectiveness of the initiatives. The results will provide a means of determining which programs are proven better at accomplishing higher student retention (Abele, n.d.; College Board, 2009; Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009).

A study finds 52 of 1400 institutions surveyed by the College Board (2009) report having a designated coordinator whose primary focus is retention, and 73.9% report having a retention committee. However, a shortcoming noted among the majority of these institutions is the lack of

authority vested in the coordinator to initiate new programs. Furthermore, coordinators who can initiate new programs often lack the authority to fund such programs (College Board, 2009; Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009). Retention efforts are more likely to be decentralized rather than falling under the direction of an individual. These efforts involve constituents throughout the campus with academic advising at the very core of all the institutional efforts (Oertel, 2007).

A unified body of research supports several well-known and often used retention initiatives. A common thread identified in studies on student retention rates and persistence to graduation is the need for an integrated approach between academic and student affairs (ACT, 2004; Hanover Research, 2011; Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009). Strategies that are shown to be successful employ a campus-wide approach where faculty, administration, and staff work together to address both academic and non-academic issues affecting student success (Hanover Research, 2011; Utah State University, 2010). Many of these programs target first-year students because findings show that following the initial first-to-second year transition period, student attrition rates decrease by approximately 50% in each subsequent year (Hanover Research, 2011). The first-year experience is identified as a critical factor in the student's decision to drop out or to continue to work toward the completion of a degree (Tinto, 2006; Tinto, 2012). Some effective first-year programs at four-year institutions include summer orientation sessions, summer bridge programs, and access to advising. Other first-year efforts include residential and non-residential student learning communities, a summer reading program, and freshman seminar classes (Hanover Research, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2008). For public institutions, "the integration of advising with first-year transition programs has the strongest effect on retention rates" (Hanover Research, 2011, p. 7). Having advisors available at optimal times and at locations highly frequented by students, referred to as "moving advisors to the students," is advocated as an effective means of integrating advising into first-year programs. It is also noted that students who live on campus in the critical first year of college earn higher grades and have a higher first-year retention rate (Abele, n.d.).

Multiple sources indicate successful retention initiatives are a result of working partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs, which include collaborative efforts with other vital entities inside and outside the college or university community (ACT 2004; Utah State University, 2010; Wichita Area Technical College, n.d.). The clear inference is that administrators, faculty, staff, and students each have responsibility in enhancing retention rates,

thereby promoting student success (Utah State University, 2010). According to the Noel-Levitz National Center for Enrollment Management (2008), “Persistence depends on the extent to which an individual has been integrated and engaged in the academic and non-academic components of the campus community” (p. 9).

What Is the Role of Faculty in Student Retention?

Student retention must be a university-wide endeavor, but to make notable increases in retention and graduation rates, it is imperative that institutions center attention and actions on the classroom. Initiatives must focus on enhancing student success in the classroom in ways that may necessitate changes in structure and instructional design (Tinto, 2012). Research shows that active involvement promotes students’ conceptual understanding and development of cognitive skills, such as critical thinking (Pundak, Herscovitz, Shacham, & Wisser-Biton, 2009). The implication is that faculty adoption of teaching strategies centered on active student involvement in the classroom is vital to the achievement of desired retention and graduation results.

Tinto (2006) states, “It is increasingly clear that faculty actions in the classroom are critical to institutional efforts to increase retention” (p. 7). Among the list of retention principles generated from related research, the Noel-Levitz Center for Enrollment Management (2008) includes an observation that the best educational services are unable “to compensate for the absence of competent and conscientious faculty” (p. 9). Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) state that faculty members’ influence is visible inside and outside the classroom and “their behaviors and attitudes affect students profoundly, which suggests that faculty members play the single-most important role in student learning” (p. 21). Tinto (2006) remarked about the classroom, “If involvement does not occur there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere,” and the actions of faculty are a key factor in efforts to positively impact retention (p. 4). It follows logically that faculty’s impact on student retention is significant considering: 1) faculty members have, in most cases, consistently more contact with students than other campus officials; 2) faculty members provide academic assessment results; and 3) faculty members are in strategic positions to observe actions perceived as warning signs of possible attrition (Cuseo, 2005.; Wichita Area Technical College, n.d.). Most faculty readily acknowledge the importance of retaining students, but according to Tinto (2006), they do not view student retention as a part of their job responsibilities. Instead, faculty members attribute the lack of student persistence to deficient academic skills or self-motivation. “This is what we now refer to as blaming the victim” (Tinto, 2006, p. 2). Faculty

members recurrently propose that the retention problem can be remedied by admitting better prepared students (Tinto, 2006). A commonly held viewpoint among many was “students had a right to fail,” and institutions saw no reason to monitor students who ceased attending before degree completion (Magna Publications, 2010, p. 1). Given the current climate, this perspective, by necessity, is rapidly changing.

The new heightened awareness of student retention and success requires institutions to place more emphasis on the product of the students’ collegiate experiences – what did they learn? Rather than measuring student success by simply looking at course completion, this emphasis focuses on students’ acquisition of designated learning outcomes specific to each course. This new approach enhances the students’ chances of success in subsequent coursework, as well as their chosen careers. Beyond the students’ responsibility for their learning, institutions via the faculty must assume responsibility as well. This approach also signifies a paradigm change from “teaching” to “learning,” measuring institutional success by student results, namely retention and graduation rates. “Retention is not only a growing expectation and imperative, but it is also an opportunity for faculty members to take the lead in innovating, researching, and implementing new strategies while demonstrating their effectiveness” (Magna Publications, 2010, p. 1). Institutions that make effective teaching a priority reflect that in policies that offer incentives and recognitions for faculty who endeavor to provide academic environments and innovative instructional strategies conducive to student learning (Tinto, 2005; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Presently, the College Board (2009) reports 70% of surveyed institutions indicate rewards for faculty teaching first-year students are minimal at best. Tinto (2006) further asserts that until the education and retention of students is rewarded through promotion and tenure policies, “many faculty will only give it lip service” (p. 9).

Although the research emphasizes the critical and crucial role that faculty assume in student persistence and success, concern is raised over the lack of perceived attention given to undergraduate education and the fact that many lower level courses are taught by part-time faculty or junior faculty. Many of these courses are taken by students in their first year, a time in which the decision to stay or leave is most frequently made (Tinto, 2006; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). This is not to imply that some part-time or junior faculty are not effective instructors, but they generally do not have as much as experience and are more loosely committed to the goals and mission of the institution (Tinto, 2006). Flegle, Pavone, and Flegle

(2009) advocate in the interest of student retention that first-year courses should be taught by experienced faculty, putting “the best first” (p. 4). Taking this concept further, Kinzie (2005) states that “senior faculty members send strong messages to their colleagues and others when they teach lower division and introductory courses and experiment with engaging pedagogies such as student-led seminars and group presentations, community-based projects and applied learning” (p. 2). It is apparent that effective initiatives designed to address student success in a meaningful manner must include the participation of all faculty assigned to teach.

Faculty Initiatives at Middle Tennessee State University

At Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), there is heightened awareness across the campus of the mission to promote student success and to prepare students to thrive in professional careers in a changing global society. The current atmosphere makes it clear that no university constituent escapes responsibility in contributing to the achievement of this goal.

MTSU is a comprehensive, bachelor, master, and doctoral degree-granting institution of higher education with an undergraduate student population of approximately 24,000, representing about 88% of its total enrollment. Data from 2012-2013 indicate that approximately three-fourths of all students are full-time, and minority students comprise 30% of the enrollment. Ninety-three percent of all students are in-state residents, and approximately 47% of the undergraduate enrollment receives financial assistance through Federal Pell Grants. MTSU is considered a commuter college with many students employed either part-time or full-time in off-campus jobs.

With the demographics of the undergraduate student population in mind, a concerted effort is underway to develop programs and generate ideas that encourage student engagement and involvement in campus life while also promoting student success in academic endeavors. MTSU is continuing its commitment to fostering student success amidst a challenging economic environment with dwindling funds for public higher education while responding to requirements set forth in the Complete College Tennessee Act (CCTA) of 2010. At the heart of the CCTA agenda are reforms for public higher education to better equip Tennesseans through education and training for increased productivity in the state’s economic development (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2010). Under the direction of the University Leadership Council, the Quest for Student Success 2013-2016 is the culmination of institutional efforts at MTSU

focusing on improved educational experiences and improved student success rates. The Quest for Student Success 2013-2016 explicitly makes visible the goals, strategies, and objectives to all constituents within the University community, those with a vested interest in achieving the institutional mission (Middle Tennessee State University, 2013).

Faculty-to-Student Initiatives

Some programs from the Quest for Student Success 2013-2016 target increasing student interaction with faculty. The classroom is usually the first place where faculty and students meet and where students are introduced to and initially involved with campus life. Faculty members in all academic departments are being strongly encouraged through discussions at departmental meetings and through advice from department chairs to maintain precise attendance records. Attendance polices are now required in course syllabi for many general education classes. This effort intends to create greater student awareness, self-efficacy, and accountability with regard to the effect of multiple absences on successful course completion. Unofficial Withdrawal Rosters completed by faculty at specified times in the semester alert the administration to students who have never attended or who have stopped attending class. Faculty are also required to generate early warning alerts (before and during mid-term) to identify students who may be at risk academically. Faculty members through MTSU's online services have access throughout the semester to Academic Progress Reports. Faculty at any time can report concerns about a student's academic progress using the student's MTSU ID number to automatically send messages to the student's email address, as well as to a designated advisor. If students have downloaded the MTSU Mobile App to their electronic devices, they can view messages there as well. A campus-wide schedule of Academic Progress Reports also requires faculty to evaluate student progress early in the student's coursework. The alerts provide students with early and frequent feedback about academic progress. If students are successful in the classroom, then they are more likely to continue with their educational pursuits. Academic goals, skills, and self-confidence are major considerations in improving student retention.

The promotion of undergraduate research is another program to encourage more student involvement on campus and interaction with faculty and other students. In the past, faculty typically directed only graduate student research projects. The MTSU Undergraduate Research Center, established in 2004, promotes undergraduate research by providing university support for students and faculty members who mentor undergraduate students in scholarly activities. This

support includes grants, travel monies, and opportunities to present research at local, state, and national venues. Grants are administered by the Undergraduate Research Experience and Creative Activity Committee. This new emphasis at MTSU on engaging undergraduate students in directed research activities is an effort to promote a sense of community between students and faculty and among students themselves.

Faculty Professional Development

To provide assistance for faculty in these endeavors, MTSU offers a variety of workshops both for pedagogical and technological faculty development through the University's Learning, Teaching, and Innovative Technologies Center (LT&ITC). Faculty members are also invited and/or selected to join faculty learning communities (FLCs) covering a variety of interest areas. For example, the LT&ITC supports a faculty learning community that coordinates and oversees the assignment of teaching mentors to faculty who voluntarily request a teaching mentor. Another faculty learning community was selected to develop a crosswalk mapping the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in K-12 education to the general education student learning outcomes required by the state governing board. Information about this MTSU faculty initiative to integrate CCSS into general education requirements is shared by the Ayers Institute (2014) at Lipscomb University where viewers can link to a draft of the Math Crosswalk. This particular learning community also developed a best practices document to identify teaching goals and activities for all general education classes and teachers. Learning communities are also organized for faculty interested in issues such as information literacy, plagiarism, civic learning and civic engagement, emerging technologies, and eLearning pedagogies. Members in some FLCs receive a modest stipend for their participation and work in the learning community.

In additional efforts to facilitate a student's successful transition to college, the state holds regional meetings to promote communication between public education and postsecondary education teachers. These meetings provide information to both groups about the Common Core Standards and implementation methods in progress. Other information about college readiness programs and bridge programs between secondary and postsecondary schools is made available. Participants share what is happening across various higher education and public K-12 campuses in the region. MTSU faculty members are encouraged by their department chairs and by the General Education program to participate in these events.

The Quest for Student Success 2013-2016 advocates a faculty learning community in each college, operating under the umbrella of the LT&ITC, with the goal of enhancing student success. Faculty participating in these particular faculty learning communities will collaborate to encourage academic and social interaction among the students both within and beyond the classroom. Also, as part of the strategies outlined for student success, the University identified those courses campus-wide which typically have high D, F, W rates. Some of these courses have been selected for redesign to focus on new learning configurations. In the department of mathematics, two general education courses are initially under redesign. Both the pre-calculus and introductory statistics courses are piloting a new or modified curriculum that seeks to engage students in the learning process using an active learning approach to lessons rather than the traditional lecture format. Faculty members teaching these redesigned courses are offered workshops for training and guidance in the implementation of these new instructional methods.

Other new initiatives at MTSU include the formation of a retention committee in each of its seven academic colleges. Faculty members from various departments which are housed in their respective colleges participate to provide faculty input for this initiative. For example, the charge given to one of the college retention committees specified the following objectives: 1) propose ways to improve and maintain the quality of academic advising at both college and university levels, 2) identify educational issues and needs related to the retention of all students, as well as the specific needs of targeted student populations, and 3) organize programs and events to improve student connections to the college, departments, and faculty. These are part of continuing efforts to increase retention and graduation rates. Recommendations coming forth from these committees will create more intervention techniques to increase student success.

Closing Considerations

In addition to introducing programs and initiatives to improve student persistence to graduation, research is needed to assess the effectiveness of these programs to determine what works. Measures must be developed to evaluate programs within the institution and to make comparisons with peer institutions. Another concern is that the overabundance of initiatives without measurement of the results might lead to conflicting effects and competition for internal financial support from a limited supply of resources. Often, a disconnect among the various campus entities working to improve student success results in duplication of efforts. Programs

can also be abandoned prematurely without sufficient time and evaluation to judge their effectiveness. Nevertheless, the collaborative efforts of all institutional constituents are vital in achieving the most important goal of improving student success in higher education.

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