

ENHANCING STUDENT SUCCESS WITH A CONNECTEDNESS FOCUSED RETENTION INITIATIVE: THE LIFE PROGRAM

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Abstract

LIFE is an educational and interactive program designed to increase college student retention rates through enhanced institutional engagement and connectedness. Retention rates among four-year public institutions within the United States continue to decrease each year. While rates at Mississippi State University are higher than national averages, effective programming can still potentially improve retention rates. Emotional wellbeing, mental capacity, financial exigencies, and social belonging are all factors that contribute to a student's decision-making process to return to school. Introducing students to available resources across campus and creating scenarios which develop utilization skills may enhance retention and graduation rates. Implementation processes are described and initial outcomes from the LIFE program are reported.

Keywords: Higher education retention, student success, best practices, collaborative programming, housing and residence life, student well-being, research article.

Introduction

During the fall semester of 2017, an estimated 20.4 million students attended American colleges and universities with 13.4 million attending a 4-year institution in pursuit of their undergraduate degree (NCES, 2017). The National Student Clearing Housing Research Center estimated that just over half (56.4%) of students who enrolled in college in the fall 2012 semester completed their degree program within six years at the same institution, and completion rates continue to decline (Completing College, 2018). One

factor contributing to students' abilities to complete their degree programs is if they decide to return to college after their first academic year, which has been an area of focus among institutions of higher education. Of all students who started college in the fall semester of 2016, only 61.6 percent were retained the following year at their starting institution (Persistence & Retention, 2018). Retention rate is defined as the percentage of students who return to college at the same institution for their second year, while persistence rate is the percentage of students who returned at any institution (Persistence & Retention, 2018). Nearly one in eight students who start college in any term transfers to a different institution by the following fall (Persistence & Retention, 2018). Among student demographics, African-American students are found to have the lowest retention rates of any group with a national average of 52.5% returning to their starting institutions (Persistence & Retention, 2018). Thus, retention rate improvement strategies can be particularly effective when working with minority populations.

In the fall of 2018, Mississippi State University announced a record enrollment of 21,883 students with 3,599 being first-time freshmen (Laird, 2018). Among this record class, 80.1 percent returned for their sophomore year, and based on results from a 2011 cohort study of 2,886 students, it is projected that 57.9 percent will graduate within six years (Mississippi State University [MSU] Graduation Rates, 2018). Although the university's retention and completion rates are higher than the national average, outcomes can be improved with additional efforts, supported by evidence-based practices, and enacted by students, faculty, and staff.

Several factors have been found to influence a students' decision not to return to college including, but not limited to; conflicts between academic work and life, financial exigencies, social support, stress, depression, and sleep trouble (Sagenmuller, 2018). Each influential factor works hand in hand to contribute to a student's wellbeing and a student's ability to maintain good overall health while in college. In the Spring of 2018, the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II reported stress (35.3%), anxiety (28.1%), sleep difficulty (23.5%), and depression (19.8%) as being important factors affecting individual academic performance (ACHA, 2018). Student engagement and connectedness are often viewed as mechanisms for enhancing successful coping with life events that may otherwise reduce student retention and success. Astin's Theory of

Involvement reiterates this connection by suggesting the importance of three core concepts of influences (inputs, environments, and outcomes), in addition to five basic postulates about involvement (Astin, 1984). These five assumptions suggest that involvement requires an investment of both psychosocial and physical energy, occurs along a continuum that is distinct for each individual, has both qualitative and quantitative aspects which allows for measurement, purports that growth is directly associated to the quality of involvement within a program, and lastly, positively correlates academic performance with student involvement. From this theoretical background, three variables of interest were identified to help increase student involvement rates, and thus retention. The variables are knowledge of campus resources, students' perceived support, and likelihood to contact a campus resource.

Based on these findings, the LIFE program was developed and implemented by Mississippi State University's programming and development committee within the Department of Housing and Residence Life in an ongoing effort to increase student retention. The purpose of this program was to improve student engagement, campus connection, and overall student wellbeing through increased knowledge of campus resources and the development of utilization skills via scenarios to enhance retention and graduation rates.

Origins of the LIFE Program Initiative

The LIFE program was based on a collaboration between the Department of Housing and Residence Life and 36 departments and offices at Mississippi State University and in the community as part of a larger student success initiative. Each year, a university-wide initiative referred to as the Maroon Edition encourages activities and discussions based on a common reading selection given to incoming students at both freshman and transfer student orientation during the summer.

The LIFE Program Approach to Student Retention

The vision of the LIFE program was to connect college students to organizations that supported student success, while increasing student engagement through an interactive, educational program. The program had two components, an educational and interactive aspect. The educational aspect of the program included highlighting the support networks available within the institution via a "Resource Fair". The university-wide

resource fair allowed students to meet representatives from 36 departments and offices within the Division of Student Affairs in addition to academic departments to learn about the opportunities available for engagement in student life (Table 1).

Table 1. List of on-campus and off-campus departments and offices represented at the LIFE Program Resource Fair.

On-Campus	• Maroon Edition	• Health Promotion and Wellness	• Resident Hall Association
• Department of Geoscience	• Department of Computer Science	• University Recreation	• The Career Center
• Student Counseling Services	• Holmes Cultural Diversity Center	• Dean of Student Success	• MSU Libraries
• Center for Student Activities	• Admission and Scholarships	• Shackouls Honor College	• Academic Advising Center
• Office of Family Services	• Financial Aid	• Student Leaderships and Community Engagement	• National Residence Hall Honorary
• Center for American's Veterans	• College of Forest Resources	• University Police Department	• Student Government Association
• Office of Compliance and Integrity	• Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life	• Collegiate Recovery Center	• Barnes & Noble
• Montgomery Leadership Program	• Maroon Volunteer Center		• Aramark
• Housing and Residence Life	• Department of Sociology		Off-Campus
			• Little Caesars Pizza
			• Sports Center
			• The Lodge

Participants were given a “resource guide,” which was a booklet that contained a brief description of each office, the services they provided, and contact information for follow-up. The book’s guide was designed to connect young adults with national organizations helping them overcome adverse situations, and the LIFE program was designed to do the same at the local, campus level. Booklets were stamped by each department or office to designate when students had interacted.

The interactive aspect of the program included student participation in a large-scale adaptation of the popular board game LIFE. Sidewalk squares depicted board game pieces and represented potential challenges pertinent to the college experience from move-in to graduation, with campus jobs, friendships, and final exams along the path. Points were accumulated through collecting or losing fictional money when landing on a space, in

addition to “life experiences” for key moments in a student’s career. For instance, a student may roll a specific number and land on a board game space which includes scenarios such as “Receive on-campus job, receive \$300”, “Help friend study for exam, +300 life experience”, “Laptop needs replacement, lose \$500”, or “Procrastinate studying for an exam, -400 life experience”. After landing on each space, program mentors initiated a dialogue with students about avenues of support and relevant campus resources that can be utilized. Program mentors included undergraduate Residential Advisors who had lived on campus for at least a full academic year and were knowledgeable of campus resources.

Methods of Evaluation for the LIFE Program

The quantitative instrument used to determine the effectiveness of the program was a pre-and post-survey questionnaire administered at check-in for program participation and immediately following completion of the program. The instrument was developed by the program planning committee. Seven items were included on the instrument, which included both Likert-type and open-ended responses. Sample questions included “I feel supported as a student”, “How knowledgeable are you with campus resources”, and “How likely are you to reach out to a campus resource?” The instrument was piloted with department student employees to gauge their feedback on the format, length, readability, and convenience of taking both pre- and post-program surveys prior to administering the final survey instrument to the participants in this program. Face and construct validity were addressed through a panel of five student affairs professionals. Data were analyzed through a paired-samples *t*-test in SPSS.

The LIFE program was open to the over 5,000 student residents on the Mississippi State University campus. The program was held in the courtyard area of two separate residential zones to allow easier access to the on-campus student population. Over 200 students ($N = 205$) participated in the initial LIFE intervention. Recruitment efforts included flyers within the residence hall, visual signage, local radio, various social media outlets, student emails, and word of mouth.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results for Student Knowledge of Campus Resources, Students' Perceived Support, and Students' Likelihood to Contact Campus Resources.

Outcome	Pretest (n=197)		Posttest (n=138)		n	95% CI for Mean Difference	t*	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD					
Student Knowledge of Campus Resources	4.17	1.21	4.79	0.70	107	-0.890, -0.362	-4.703	106	.000
Students' Perceived Support	4.43	0.65	4.54	0.68	136	-0.252, -0.46	-1.364	135	.175
Students' Likelihood to Contact Campus Resources	3.39	0.88	3.96	0.97	136	-0.733, -0.360	-5.368	135	.000

Note: $p < .05$.

Results of the paired-samples *t*-test in Table 2 show that mean level of student knowledge of campus resources differs before ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.21$) and after completing the LIFE program ($M = 4.79$, $SD = .70$) at the 0.05 level of significance ($t = -4.703$, $df = 106$, $p < .001$). Results of the mean level of support felt by students also differed before ($M = 4.43$, $SD = .65$) and after completing the LIFE program ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .68$) at the .05 level of significance ($t = -1.364$, $df = 135$, $p > .05$), and mean likelihood for a student to contact a campus resources differed from before ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.88$) and after completing the LIFE program ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.973$) at the .05 level of significance ($t = 5.368$, $df = 135$, $p < .001$). Over 200 students ($N = 205$) participated in the Life program. Of the sample population, 197 completed the pre-program survey, while 138 completed the post-program survey.

Conclusion

Results of paired *t*-tests showed significant improvements in student knowledge of campus resources ($p < .01$) and likely intent to contact said resources ($p < .01$) as a result of

participation in the LIFE program. The program did show an improvement in students' perceptions of support at their institution; however, this measure did not meet significance ($p > .05$). These results are valuable as Astin's Theory of Involvement suggests a student's overall success will be improved through involvement in college, which can lead to a higher quality of life, including overall health, while in college (Astin, 1984). Healthier student populations may improve student retention rates. Increased campus community involvement can influence student health in multiple dimensions, and improvements in retention rates by addressing the factors influencing a student's decision to return. This includes conflicts between academic work and life, financial exigencies, social support, stress, depression and sleep trouble (Sagenmuller, 2017). The LIFE program approach may be useful to institutions of higher education throughout the U.S. as each institution considers resources that work toward student success. Interdepartmental or community collaboration allows for a sharing of resources and can better impact student populations. Linking scenarios of stress of adversity in a student's collegiate career to available support networks can prove effective in helping students get the help they need and improve institutional involvement. This can potentially relate to a better sense of institutional connectedness and an increase in retention.

Limitations of this study included the population sample size and lack of demographic information collected from those who participated in the LIFE program. Additional research is suggested to analyze the student demographics that attended the LIFE program. By not considering this information, we cannot correlate if this program is helping minority populations who, as mentioned previously, are the most vulnerable to not return for their second year. Student identification cards were swiped during the check-in process that can serve as an avenue of collecting additional student information. Approximately 5.6 % of our total student population of interest participated in the LIFE program. A large subject size can improve the generalizability of the findings of the program. The lack of a larger sample size has the potential to skew data to certain populations, such as those living in the residential communities in which the program was held.

Participation in programs such as the LIFE program has immediate implications for students who participate. Students who participated in the program had an increased

awareness of the resources available to them on campus and off campus. This awareness could translate to involvement. The involvement could in turn improve the perceived quality of life of students, and positively impact the retention rates at the institution of the students involved. This awareness ultimately has the potential to improve the quality of life and health outcomes of those involved for years beyond their undergraduate experiences.

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