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Four Strategies Institutions of Higher Learning Can Leverage to Help Returning College Students Succeed

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Abstract

This chapter reviews four successful strategies for returning college students. These four strategies include (1) making meaningful connections with one or more teachers (Kenamer & Campbell, 2011), (2) involvement in student peer groups (Zinger & Cohen, 2010), (3) counselor or student advisor support (Smith & Allen, 2014), and (4) access to discrete point learning such as technical assistance or help with accessing library

resources (Henson, 2014). The authors will explore how these activities promote student success and how institutions of higher education can more fully incorporate these strategies.

Overview

According to the American Council on Education, nontraditional adult learners have been a growing presence in college settings since the 1970s (Soares, 2013). Institutions have been gradually adapting to this reality with multiple updates to both college culture and services that colleges provide. In a study of nontraditional students, Wyatt (2011) identified eight strategies that stand out as more likely to help nontraditional students succeed in higher education. Additional studies support four of these strategies for making a difference in the success of students who are returning to college. These strategies are listed above. This chapter explores these four strategies in greater detail, both how these strategies can help drive returning student success and how institutions of higher education can incorporate them more fully into their practices.

Review of the Literature

Meaningful Connections with Teachers

Students need to feel that their teachers are in place to help them succeed. Teachers need to create opportunities to form bonds with students. Rosenberg (2003) posited that in higher education, teachers should no longer be seen only as dispensers of knowledge, but facilitators in the learning process, using compassionate communication. It is not expected that each teacher will develop a connection with each student, but teachers need to create an open environment and a willingness to view each student as a unique individual. In effect, what's being discussed here is engagement. Wyatt (2011) pointed out that college educators can serve as the front line for student engagement, which can have a positive impact on student success.

Involvement in Student Peer Groups

The notion of the traditional student in higher education is changing (Wyatt, 2011). In past decades, most who attended college were recent high school graduates who came ready to form new peer groups and had the discretionary time to do so. This allows peer groups to form organically. In today's college classes, returning students usually do not have these luxuries. Still, the benefits that peer groups can have for student success have not changed. Recognizing this, Zevallos and Washburn (2014) promoted the facilitation of peer groups as part of a formal, program-wide initiative. More details about this will be provided later in the chapter. The bottom line is this: schools that want their returning students to have the known advantages of camaraderie, socialization, and a sense of teamwork through positive group experiences will take steps to encourage the formation of peer groups in their programs.

Counselor or Student Advisor Support

Individual students have individual needs. This has been documented by a number of higher education researchers (Smith & Allen, 2014). To the degree school counselors and student advisors can assist with the needs of returning students, it will determine how likely students will find success in their academic efforts. Colleges can more fully leverage counselors and advisors to improve success for returning college students.

Access to Discrete Point Learning and Student Services

In a review of what Northeast Alabama Community College has done to improve academic success for its returning students, Kennamer and Campbell (2011) asserted that the more services institutions can provide for students, the better off students will be. Services that universities can offer include library and research services, technology assistance, health services, financial aid officers, career placement or tutoring services, and disability services. These are just some examples of specific services institutions can make available to students. The question is: How many of

these service areas do students use, or even know about? Kennamer and Campbell (2011) encouraged colleges to do two things: (1) provide as many support services as makes sense for the institution, and (2) ensure returning students are aware of these services and use them when they are needed.

Integration into the Student Experience

Institutions of higher learning have a vested interest in guiding returning students toward positive learning experiences in their classes, which, in turn, improve their chances of completing the programs in which they enroll. Each of the four strategies discussed in this chapter can be integrated into the student experience. To accomplish this, each of these strategies will need to be integrated into the student experience in different ways.

According to Wyatt (2011), instructors can have a profound influence on student experience. Stes, DeMaeyer, Gibels, and VanPetegem (2012) affirmed this notion and build on it by calling for teachers to have a clear notion of how they approach their teaching and to make this approach known to students. They found that teachers who are open with students about their approach and offer their assistance will have more success with students. Stes et al. (2012) further asserted that students' perceptions of satisfaction and success can be directly tied to their experiences with teachers, making it all the more important that teachers connect not only with returning students but with all students.

In the area of peer group formation, schools can take a more active role in making this happen. In years past, colleges found their numbers were predominately made up of recent high school graduates. The new traditional students for today are more experienced individuals, who have been in the work world for some time and are now returning to school. For these students, time is at a premium. They do not attend college to increase their social circle. What they don't realize, according to Zevallos and Washburn (2014), is that the time put into peer efforts such as mentoring and socialization can improve student success. To help facilitate this, Zevallos and Washburn (2014) recommended colleges encourage programs that make specific tasks of students helping students and then provide either in-class time or other space resources where partners and

groups can meet. Adding in a component that has peer groups report back to teachers and to classes can increase accountability even more and lead to even greater student success.

In the arena of counselor, advisor, and student interaction, Smith and Allen (2014) encouraged institutions to give counselors and advisors higher visibility with students. They suggested that making advisors a specific topic in student orientations, promoting advising services through school newsletters, on-campus advertising strategies, and through student-connected media channels can help increase awareness of the services available, and help students become more comfortable in using these services.

Advising and counseling services are two of the many services and learning centers that colleges can offer to returning students. According to Kennamer and Campbell (2011), returning students will use the service and learning centers they most need. Similar to what will work with advising and counseling centers, colleges should look to make these opportunities known and then encourage students to take advantage of them as needed. Increasing awareness can be done through in-class announcements and discussions, hallway advertising, and use of student-wide communication channels such as e-mail or advertising on web-based student portals.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

In many ways, institutions of higher learning are not different than any other organization. Certainly this is true regarding the initiation and propagation of change within an organization. For any organization, the literature is consistent on this one point: organization-wide initiatives have a much higher chance of success when higher-level leaders provide their support (Rankinen et al., 2009; Suci & Petrescu-Prahova, 2011; Kim et al., 2013). Support can be demonstrated in many ways, but those that connect with a clear use of a leader's time, attention, and the distribution of organizational resources to specific goals will have the greatest influence on incorporation and continuation of initiatives (Church & Rotolo, 2013).

For university leaders, the application is the same. Initiatives designed to help returning students find academic success—be they campaigns for increased teacher/student connectedness, encouraging student peer groups or counselor and advisor support, or leveraging multiple college service centers—have the best chance when higher-level officials support

them. University leaders can show this support by giving their time, prolonged attention, and the organizational funds necessary to create influential, sustainable, student-success-oriented operations. These actions, coupled with organizational member buy-in, and a clear mission-related purpose will help these strategies succeed (Church & Rotolo, 2013).

Success through this pattern has been documented in the literature. In this chapter, this pattern with respect to peer group formations has been highlighted (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014) through leader support of specific school service centers (Kennamer & Campbell, 2011) and in the positive impact that college advisors can have on returning student success (Smith & Allen, 2014).

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

To support new initiatives or improvements to current college practices for helping returning college students invites conversation in two subject areas, both related to change: first, how change in one area may affect other areas (systems-related considerations) and, second, factors that influence change success.

Senge (2005) discussed organizations as systems made up of individual parts that often interconnect. Therefore, change made in one area is likely to have an impact in another area. In this respect, institutions of higher education are no different than any other organization—what happens in one area of the organization, or how team members are asked to change, is likely to affect other parts of the operation. In this chapter, four recommendations were set forth for helping returning students succeed: developing meaningful connections with teachers, involvement in student peer groups, encouraging counselor or student advisor support, and access to discrete point learning and student services. Though on the surface, each of these areas might seem somewhat disconnected; they are, in fact, connected, in that they all center around helping students succeed.

As resources, time, and attention are devoted to these different areas, it will be important to understand that additional support to one initiative will help all parts of the organization. To assist with buy-in, it will help if leaders remind all organizational members of this fact: that what benefits students, benefits all parts of the organization. Support, therefore, should

be provided by all areas of the school: student services, registration, testing, security, et cetera. The key is that whatever school officials choose to focus on to help returning students succeed will be seen as important to the entire organization. Attempts made to help returning students succeed are to be supported by all college staff and faculty.

This leads to the second tip for success in organizational improvement. When it comes to overseeing organizational improvements, Church and Rotolo (2013) have identified four recommendations for organizations to improve chances that efforts will last beyond an initial “high energy start phase.” Though Church and Rotolo (2013) discussed improving diversity and inclusion in organizations, their recommendations make sense for any organization working to improve the chances for success. The four ingredients they cite as necessary for creating lasting change are (1) clear and persuasive business reasons for the effort(s), (2) full employee engagement, (3) committed leadership, and (4) an embedded approach. Each of these will be discussed briefly in reference for higher education administrators and what can be done to help returning students succeed.

As stated earlier, helping not only returning students but *all* students succeed should be at the forefront of every decision that college leaders make. School leaders and faculty need to see the value of this as the foundation of their work. Why do institutions exist if not to help students, all students, learn from classes and move through an academic program? This can be seen as a clear and persuasive business reason to support the four strategies for success discussed in this chapter.

Full employee engagement will follow from clear and persuasive business reasons for the effort. Experience, however, tells us that this is not always the case. If a school, for example, initiates a program to bring in new students, but in this program the state requires additional testing or registration services, it will be important for all offices involved to be on board with this, to be a part of the transition and want to help rather than seeing this as “additional work” that has to be done. Seeing service to students, any service to students, as that which benefits the entire school in achieving its mission is critical. Helping staff and faculty members make this mental transition can be a challenge, but it is a challenge that must be met to improve the chances that high-quality support will continue for any improvements school leaders wish to make.

For higher education administrators who want to help returning students succeed, committed leadership is reflected in the time, attention,

and direction school officials give. Leaders may say they want certain things to happen, but as the saying goes, “talk is cheap.” If leaders do not show focused, lasting support for actions that can help returning students succeed, the chances that these initiatives continue will be limited.

The last item on Church and Rotolo’s (2013) checklist for improving the chances for success in change efforts is what they call using an “embedded” approach. What this means is incorporating transitions in a way that makes them part of the regular work flow. This is as opposed to having things seen, once again, as “additional work” to be done. An example that illustrates this with respect to one of the success traits discussed herein is the student/teacher connection. For teachers to do what can be done to help foster better connections between returning students and themselves could be seen as a given and not as an additional work requirement. Faculty should be selected that have this as their philosophy of education. In the area of encouraging peer groups, school facilities personnel could be looking to identify and dedicate space that facilitates this behavior. This is just one example of what should be a natural inclination for those who oversee this part of a school’s operation.

Conclusion

Certain practices have been shown to help returning college students succeed, including (1) making meaningful connections with teachers, (2) involvement in student peer groups, (3) counselor or student advisor support, and (4) access to discrete point learning such as technical assistance or help with accessing library resources. Research is clear that colleges and universities that put resources, policies, and systems in place to facilitate these four strategies will see increases in both student satisfaction and student success.

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