Policies and Programs for the Retention of Underrepresented Students in a Southeastern Technical College

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Title:

Policies and Programs for the Retention of Underrepresented Students in a Southeastern Technical College

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to examine practices related to the retention of underrepresented students at a technical college in the southeastern U.S. This study sought to examine the retention practices and programs of a technical college with a student population comprised of more than 50% of students from underrepresented groups, yet has maintained retention rates comparable to four-year institutions. The research questions that guided this study were:

Central RQ: What policies and programs does a technical college in the southeastern United States, with a student body comprised of a majority of underrepresented students implement to maintain retention rates comparable to those of the four-year institutions in the region? Additional questions that also guided the research include,

1. How do chief admissions and enrollment officers describe the retention policies and programs implemented within the institution?

2. What policies and programs are implemented to promote degree attainment for underrepresented students?

3. How are retention policies and programs institutionalized?

Theoretical Framework:

Student retention as described by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 1997, 2005) was used to provide the foundation of knowledge for understanding institutional practices and student retention.
According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), institutions with structured and intentional programs for first-year and underrepresented students realize greater levels of student retention than institutions that do not implement such programs. Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) assert that approximately two-thirds of significant cognitive gains in academic areas are made during the first two years of college. Tinto (2012) posits that it is imperative for institutions to create positive experiences for underrepresented students, as low retention is prevalent among these students. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) recognize practices such as new student orientation, first-year seminars, and academic and social support programs as critical to the retention and success of new and underrepresented students.

Detailed methods:

A single-site case study was used to carry out the proposed research, which Merriam (1998) asserts is appropriate for studies that explore procedures and practices within a bounded system, or case. The site selected for conducting research is a technical college, located in a rural area and in the southeastern region of the U.S. For the purpose of anonymity, the institution will be referred to as Southeast Technical College. This institution is home to more than 80 associate degree, diploma and certificate programs, and provides educational services such as General Educational Development (GED) testing, and Quick Start training. The institution served approximately 13,000 people through academic and other programs, and boasts retention rates of approximately 60% in 2010 and greater than 65% in 2011 (IPEDS, 2013).

In this study, the researcher collected all data derived from interviews, document reviews, and observations. One-on-one interviews were conducted on campus and audiotaped for transcription by the researcher. Additionally, observation of enrollment and admissions officers engaged in retention planning and discussion, and the review of documents related to retention were also conducted by the
interviewer. A total of ten administrators were invited by the Vice President of Student Affairs, with recommendations by the researcher, to participate in the study. The researcher was able to observe two staff meetings held by the Vice President of Student Affairs as well as day to day operations of departments under the student affairs umbrella and seven administrators participated in one-on-one interviews. More than thirty-one documents were reviewed and categorized according to themes identified by the researcher.

Results:

Four major themes were identified that answered the overarching research question as well as the ancillary research questions. Each of the four major themes, 1) The Role of Faculty in Student Retention Policies, 2) Community Partnerships and External Environmental Factors, 3) Personalizing the Student Experience; and 4) Retention as a Shared Goal answered the central research question as well as the ancillary research questions. Of the four major themes, Community Partnerships and External Environmental Factors was identified as having a negative influence on retention at Southeast Technical College based upon data collected from participants in the individual interview process, with the three remaining categorized as having a positive influence. Additionally, sixteen minor themes were identified. These minor themes provided additional, supportive data in answering each of the research questions.

Implications:

The findings of this research suggest that Southeast Technical College frequently refers students to external support services during the first year of enrollment. Institutions that service a majority of underrepresented students should maintain an array of resources to meet the diverse needs of the population they service. Particularly for students who have been identified as ‘at-risk’, the institution becomes a critical link in connecting them to support services needed. Institutional leaders of technical colleges should develop, enhance, and foster internal partnerships among departments to support
retention efforts. Chief admissions and enrollment officers at Southeast Technical College were knowledgeable of services from other departments and able to assist students with issues handled by other departments within the institution.

Recommendations:

Like technical colleges, for-profit institutions have high populations of underrepresented students. It is recommended that this study be replicated at a for-profit institution to examine retention policies and practices implemented for underrepresented students enrolled in this institutional setting.

A delimitation set by the researcher was the selection of a single institution. Therefore it is recommended that a multi-site case study be conducted to enable researchers to compare and contrast the retention practices and programs of multiple institutions. This may provide information on the way in which institutional factors such as size and culture impact retention policies and programs.