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A Critical Divide in Higher Education: Bridging the Gap Between Student Success and Organizational Leadership

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A Critical Divide in Higher Education:
Bridging the Gap Between Student Success and Organizational Leadership

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Abstract

The emergence of the use of technology in the classroom and the demand for on-line classes has created a challenge for organizational leaders in higher education to retain students and foster an atmosphere conducive to student success. The purpose of this article is to assist those leaders in determining if a leadership growth plan could be a valuable component of a comprehensive professional development plan to increase student success. The discussion in this article is based on the triangulated findings of a qualitative case study designed to generate unbiased, rich, and in-depth information from those involved in degree programs at an institution of higher learning in a southeastern state (Wyatt, 2016). Students, administrators, and teachers were surveyed and interviewed and provided information pertinent to the impact of leaders and leadership skills on student success. Success for the study was defined as the percentage of students in the four-year college study site who remain in school, increase their mean grade point average and, thus, eventually graduate or choose to transfer to another institution of higher learning.

Keywords: Organizational Leadership, Student Success, Higher Education, International Student Success, Faculty-Student Interaction, Sustainability, Student Retention, Student Engagement.

Introduction

This article is based on research conducted by this author (Wyatt, 2016) concerning the challenges involved in optimizing student success in a four-year degree program. The study confirms the perceptions presented in the District Effectiveness Report by Bowers (2010) who focused on the roles, practices, and leadership models used in successful schools. Specifically, the research agrees with the conclusion that those factors correlate to student success and also provides insights into the innovative use of the information for practicing stakeholders.

What is the perception of an effective leader and his or her influence on student success? Analysis of the literature revealed an indirect correlation between organizational leadership and student success. As stated by Lin (2012), "Improving principal leadership is a vital component to the success of educational reform initiatives that seek to improve whole-school performance, as principal leadership often exercises positive but indirect effects on student learning" (p. 2). The literature reviewed also showed a positive correlation between effective organizational leadership and effective teaching and learning (Hulpia, Devos, & Keer, 2011). The most successful correlations involved students, staff, and community resources.

Background and Justification

It has been observed that the top-ranked schools have leaders that are respected, appreciated, considered experts in running the program, and genuinely care about the students and their staff (Wyatt, 2016). Wyatt (2016) also duly observed that schools in the bottom of the rankings experienced a significant amount of condescension among leaders as well as staff dissatisfaction.

This was reflected in the staff's inability to provide exceptional service to students and their lack of leadership commitment to student engagement, retention, and success.

Reliable and valid measurability of the correlation between leadership and student success, however, is a major concern. If a leader rates highly on a leadership assessment survey, is it safe to assume the level of student success directly correlates with the leadership success rate and vice versa? In spite of measurability issues, one positive and coherent theme that warrants further study is the correlation between distributed leadership and student success in the United States and abroad. The role played by instructors in contributing to the relationship between leadership and student success is another variable that should be examined. In addition, determining the extent to which the interconnectedness of a system-wide organization allows member-leaders to effectively work together to influence individual student success should also be studied (Bowers, 2010).

Deficiencies in the evidence. According to Bowers (2010), the research on the relationship between high-performing schools and effective administration should not just address a direct correlation between the credentials of school district leaders and the performance of its students. Several other factors could play a role in the achievement of student success, such as school demographics and manipulation of the accountability system. Bowers also asserted that organizational management effectiveness on school improvement measures showed substantial error, which biased the estimate of its impact toward zero. Subsequently, Grissom and Loeb (2011) recommended additional research to refine the measurement tools of leadership in higher education in addition to determining, describing, and streamlining the factors of a leader and the leader's correlation to student success.

Student success, as described by the American Federation of Teachers (2011), is broader than degree attainment or high standardized test scores; it is the achievement of the student's own educational goals and, importantly for this article, the percentage of students in the four-year college study site who remain in school, increase their mean GPA and, thus, eventually graduate or choose to transfer to another institution of higher learning (Wyatt, 2016).

The importance of effective leadership is undisputed; few studies, however, identify the specific leadership skills required to promote student success or the correlation between the skill set and the students (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Unfortunately, research just does not tell us enough about the leadership skills required to promote student success and or if any direct correlations even exist. This article aims to present the conclusions of the Wyatt (2016) study and add to the literature base in this area.

Methodology

This author conducted a qualitative case study in which perceptual data from survey responses, a focus group, and individual interviews were collected to determine if there was a correlation between the perceptions of leadership effectiveness and student success (Wyatt, 2016). The population of the study was composed of higher education students and professionals involved with the degree programs employed at a large not-for-profit college located in a southeastern state. The participants included students, student leaders, instructors, and administrators at the main campus. The results presented are based on the voluntary and purposeful sampling of

participants by this author as a part of a research study. The data retrieved did not intend to identify responses for any one specific participant; rather, the data obtained were presented as a collective whole.

All participants ($n = 25$) anonymously completed open-ended survey questions, and a subsample of survey participants ($n = 3$) subsequently participated in a focus group using the same and some probing questions. The final subsample of survey participants ($n = 3$) participated in a face-to-face interviews in order to provide rich and in-depth information to more comprehensively answer the survey questions. The chronological sequence was surveys, focus group discussion, and then individual interviews.

According to Creswell (2012), it is not uncommon in qualitative research to study a few individuals at a single site (p. 209). The smaller participant size allowed the researcher to focus on the complexity of the site and the data retrieved from the survey participants in order to provide an in-depth picture of the research conducted. After all participants completed the open-ended survey questions, subsequently a focus-group discussion and individual interviews provided the researcher with even more rich and in-depth data that were used to better determine trends, make comparisons, show shared or contrasting elements of student success factors and organizational leadership practices across the campus, and draw conclusions.

Research Findings

Organizational silos exist in higher education, meaning that leadership professionals with responsibility for instruction, student life, academic processes, marketing, admissions, and physical space often operate separately. Leveraging institutional knowledge for student success in higher education encompasses utilizing organizational leaders as the drivers of student retention and success when designing a creative and cohesive campus for learning (Wyatt, 2016). The cohesiveness of the components is essential in recruiting students and student retention and will either hinder or promote the student's college experience and success (Strange & Banning, 2016).

According to the author's study (Wyatt, 2016), student engagement matters. What students do both mentally and physically matters in a big way. Academic accomplishments--including GPA, retention in school, and degree completion--are somewhat positively correlated with a student's persistence. The ability to effectively manipulate through life and the logistics involved in student success are more likely related to the commitment to degree completion. Student persistence can be improved by offering student success courses, tutoring in math, and collaborative workshops to connect faculty and administrators more with the students. This requires both insight and action in a continuum to bring awareness of assistance to students who are struggling to succeed and to enhance the sense of urgency required by the institutional leaders to put innovative personalized systems in place to retain the students. In short, there is a need to develop or enhance learning communities on campus encompassing students, staff, and faculty learning together.

Context of findings. Implementation of strategic staffing practices provides a stepping stone to leveraging student engagement and increasing professional competencies among faculty

and staff in higher education (Pellegrino, Synder, Crutchfield, Curtis, & Pringle, 2015). "Quality staff at any institution of Higher Education can be linked to its ability to achieve its mission of student success by educating students and preparing them for a future beyond their academic pursuits" (Pellegrino et al., 2015). Empowering leadership starts with identifying key stakeholders for leadership roles who will have the largest impact on student success and engaging them in institutional data collection and conversation to extrapolate their expertise and resources. The recruitment of change leaders should involve a hiring committee composed of higher-level administrators with the ability to formulate actionable goals and provide resources to implement change. The committee should focus on the core concerns affecting the institutional mission while simultaneously maximizing the possible returns on investment. The use of best practices to leverage leadership commitment, the implementation of academic systems that are proven to promote student success, and the administration of outcomes assessments should be utilized as the bases for determining overall institutional and international findings (Wyatt, 2016).

Limited data exist in the literature on the school leadership practices that contribute to and effect factors responsible for educational success (Dimmock & Tan, 2012). For example, Singapore's K-12 school leadership philosophy has three very unique leadership traits: (a) logistically collaborative school systems, (b) staff recruiting systems that align with the educational system's expectations, and (c) leadership-teacher relationships reflective of Chinese culture (para. 320). These distinguished attributes contribute to their tightly coupled alignment of distributed leadership, sustainability, successful outcome measures, and success across the entire Singapore school system.

A prolearning school culture is highly dependent on pedagogic processes, quality school leadership, and a motivated and engaged teaching staff. In addition, the creation of professional learning communities or clusters to establish networks among teachers is key to creating a cohesive and collaborative teaching environment among educational professionals (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014). This author found in her study (Wyatt, 2016) that learning communities did exist in a limited capacity, and the research revealed an understanding that learning communities are a source of encouragement for students to become engaged in campus activities and demonstrate the opportunity to put theory into practice within the community. Another contributing factor is the rotation of school leaders every five to seven years (Dimmock & Tan, 2012). This affords leaders the opportunity to experience the cultures of several schools as well as bring their knowledge and experience to new locations. This rotation is not limited to the schools themselves, but is also promoted in upper leadership roles (superintendents, assistant/deputy directors). This provides a great opportunity for leadership to share and implement best practices. Instructional leadership and distributed leadership are intertwined in the pursuit of academic excellence, although some leaders feel partially removed from and only proportionally involved in instructional leadership (para. 335). The functionality and forms of schools constantly evolve, and so do leaders and leadership.

According to a study in Jordan by Abu-Alruz and Khasawneh (2013), in contrast to the educational relationships in Singapore, it is believed that it is the professional identity of the educators that has a significant effect on student success in higher education. The professional identity in general can be defined as the core values, beliefs, and assumptions about one's chosen

career that differentiates it from other careers. According to the authors, faculty members exhibited lower levels of student and staff engagement related to creating a harmonious learning environment, establishing a trusting relationship, and supporting life-long learning of students; this furthered the need to identify faculty members' success as a precursor for institutional success (para. 440). This perception was identified in the triangulated results regarding their perception of administrative staff functioning in silos and not as part of a cohesive team focused on student success. This concern about limited student-faculty engagement can be improved upon by changing the university system to incorporate student-represented workgroups, committees, governance bodies, and training workshops, and community collaboration in creating career opportunities for students. Interventions to increase engaging and learning opportunities with students by faculty members will eventually lead to higher learning and achievement of the organization and its students. Pedagogical studies on the relationship between organizational leadership and student success in other countries is important, as global competitiveness in education is necessary for institutional survival and success (para. 440).

Implications

Attentiveness to student success can improve graduation rates and the quality of undergraduate programs (Kuh, 2005). Kuh (2005) affirmed one key factor to student success and student engagement, and that was the combination of time and effort students devoted to academics and related activities. Organizational leadership's role in confirming this attribution is in requiring governing boards to establish achievable benchmarks for student engagement and monitoring, both relevant in determining student and institutional attainments.

This author's study (Wyatt, 2016) found that several key indicators of student success recognized by survey participants were perceptual and difficult to measure without personal interaction with each student individually and thorough analysis and documentation of the results. These success factors include student support, creating a memorable campus experience, faculty and staff availability, continuous communication, due diligence, intrinsic motivation, study environment, and staff knowledgeable in subject matter. It is suggested that the organization's leaders use current or hire additional resources aimed at providing opportunities to make personal connections among all students, staff, and faculty on a continuous basis.

Future Direction of Research

The future direction of research on student success measures and their correlation to organizational leadership efficacy should be studied further and specifically for higher education. One area that would benefit significantly from such research is distance learning since colleges, college educators, and students are increasingly reliant on its use and effectiveness. Such studies would prove valuable in informing the applications of ideal distance learning in higher education as well as machine learning techniques designed to improve retention and 360-degree learning.

Distance learning is a growing phenomenon in higher education, and higher education leaders are looking for innovative ways to blend equipment, technology, and academic curriculum in a symposium that will enhance student-to-student and student-to-staff collaboration. As institutions of higher learning increase their distance learning opportunities, there must be a

continued focus on the correlation between student and faculty success and the use of technology by everyone engaged. The ultimate experience is to make distance learning experiences closely mimic face-to-face classroom experiences (Wyatt, 2016).

According to Kilburn, Kilburn, and Cates (2014), student loyalty has been shown to be impacted by satisfaction and institutional reputation--the perceived value. "Loyalty can be applied to the relationship between students and higher education institutions where students act as consumers of the educational product or service and therefore, are the deciders of perceived value" (Kilburn et al., 2014). The increased demand for on-line course offerings in colleges and universities places additional demands on technology, professor-student communication, and virtual pedagogy. Higher education students appreciate the convenience of the on-line course opportunities especially for the nontraditional student, but also indicate a desire to increase effective faculty engagement as well as communication about organizational and instructional changes with on-line students. On-line courses increase the perceived value of attending an institution of higher learning due to flexibility in completing course requirements. Organizational leaders need to continuously monitor the value of on-line courses and implement a comprehensive plan that continuously does so to ensure quality objectives and outcomes are achieved. A high-quality electronic learning experience will promote positive growth and will enhance the success of on-line students (Wyatt, 2016).

According to Delen (2010), machine learning techniques can also be used as a scientific retention tool in higher education. Machine learning uses patterns found in statistical data related to student attrition to detect patterns and changes in academic progress that correlate with an increased risk of leaving school. The data-driven models created are formulated to predict retention probability at the end of the first enrollment semester allowing time for the appropriate staff to put individual retention intervention resources in place prior to the subsequent semester (Delen, 2010). Delen noted in a related study (Astin, 1993) that student retention is greatly determined by the level of consistent quality interactions with peers, faculty, and staff, which positively correlates to the results of this author's study. This correlation is most prevalent in first-generation college students and facilitated by a seamless transition into college enrollment and a positive connection with college personnel. The research conducted by Delen in both studies should be used as part of the framework for developing and implementing shared organizational leadership programs.

In promoting a cohesive college experience for students, staff, and faculty as experienced in shared organizational leadership models, Tee and Ahmed (2014) used the 360-degree feedback system in a holistic manner for the purpose of improving student learning. The system is designed to provide a continuous collaborative feedback venue in instruction and learning. The 360-degree feedback system places primary focus on the communication and engagement of all the stakeholders in student success. The system embraces congeniality among faculty as it lessens the image of teachers as the unquestionable authority and creates collaborative learning among teachers and students. Collegially the system encourages feedback by leveraging cooperation among stakeholders engaged in the learning process to support the organization as a conglomerate organization. A holistic integrative approach, as used in 360-degree learning, provides opportunities for innovation teaching-learning systems. Another tool for effective learning comes about through meaningful process, such as highly scrutinized peer reviews

among teachers designed to increase academic instructional engagement (Iqbal, 2013). Such a system should also be part of the framework of any shared organizational leadership program.

Limitations

In order to alleviate the projected limitations in study responses in her study (Wyatt, 2016), the author solicited survey responses from a diverse and representative sample of students, staff, and faculty and assured them of their anonymity and strict confidentiality. Due to time constraints, feasibility in surveying participants on several campuses, and limited participant availability, the researcher limited the survey to one campus of the college in a southeastern state. Although, as stated earlier, this had its limitations, the purpose of the study and the usefulness of the results to the leaders at the study site mitigated any concerns in this area.

The rich and in-depth information generated and discussed in this article mitigated many of the perceived limitations and concerns the author had about using qualitative data. In spite of the fact that qualitative data are not generalizable to other populations, the data are extremely valuable to college leaders. This article should prove valuable to leaders of a plethora of institutions of higher learning who are also struggling with concerns about lowered enrollment, GPAs, degree completion, and retention of students.

Conclusions

College administrators should not undervalue the importance of the nontraditional student's attrition in college admissions and retention, perceptions of lack of support, and need to seek academic attention at another institution. The increase in distance learning opportunities in higher education requires the mastery of virtual engagement and retention methods in order to retain students and promote successful outcome measures. Students and educators can benefit from more shared leadership and collaborative learning proportioned among classroom discussions, practical applications, and peer-to-peer teaching (Wyatt, 2016). According to the American Federation of Teachers (2011), *"Accountability needs to flow naturally from clearly delineated responsibilities; including the responsibility faculty and staff have in the learning process."*

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