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The Role of Student Services in the Improving of Student Experience in Higher Education

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Abstract

The theme of student services has been generally neglected in terms of European policy debates. However, the Trends IV(2005) Report states that: "when redesigning the curriculum that focuses on the students, the institutions should take into consideration the fact that they need more guidance and counselling in order to find their individual academic paths in a more flexible educational environment."

In the context of multicultural academic diversity, stimulated by globalization, it is necessary for all aspects of university life, student services included, to meet these new challenges. Many aspects of student life, on an academic, social or cultural level, become more difficult to understand and manage with a population that finds itself in a state of continual growth and diversification (Audin and Davy, 2003). To this effect, the creation of efficient student services that are focused on its necessities, in order to provide the required support for academic activity and stimulate personal, social, cultural and cognitive development, is needed.

The role of these student services is influenced by the beliefs and values of the employed staff, by the manner in which the policies are elaborated, by the content of curriculum and services, and by the degree of knowledge regarding the development of the students and the way in which the environment outlines their behaviour.

Supporting and enhancing the student experience (academic, social, welfare and support) from first contact through to becoming alumni is critical to success in higher education today for both the student and the institution

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1. Purpose statement

The paper aims to emphasize the role and the importance that student services have in improving students' academic experience, with reference to various international studies. Understanding the concept of student services and their role contribute to the development of policies and strategies to support the academic field, drawing the necessary directions in improving service quality in higher education. Trends V Report (2007) shows an increase in the provision of student services in recent years. However, qualitative research results indicate that although many academic institutions and systems offer a wide variety of services, they are not very well developed or adapted to the needs of students that are in constant growth and diversification.

2. What do we mean by Student Services?

The student services concept is used to describe the divisions or departments which provide services and student support in higher education. Its purpose is to ensure the students growth and development during the academic experience. (NASPA, 2102)

Student services originated in Athenian education and universities but in the modern era is generally recognized as an American phenomenon.

Delimiting a division of student services professionals is very well defined in some countries, but in others remains an emergent phenomenon. Amid increasing diversity of students admitted to college, there has evolved additional support services that have contributed to the academic and personal development of students, including academic skills development programs and specific support to students who have difficulty learning or adapting to university life. Such services contribute to the quality of the academic experience and help students to achieve learning potential.

The functioning and organization pattern of student services varies from country to country. In some countries these services are part of university management (integrated into a student services department) in others, such as France, they are outsourced to specialized organizations (CNOUS; CROUX).

The staff working in this field are usually accredited via certification according to the position held. Training is provided through various courses and specific programs but is not mandatory. An intense concern for training professionals in student services is common in Great Britain and the United States, countries in which the diversity of such services is higher. The more universities are able to invest in a wide range of services the better they will be able to meet the needs of student development and learning, managing, among other things, therefore to maintain a high index of student satisfaction and to reduce the level of university dropout rate.

Student services are seen as key components of many academic systems. Mass recruitment into higher education has diversified student populations. In developing countries for example, students from disadvantaged groups, women, rural youth and ethnic or religious minorities have now the opportunity to study at a higher level. The student's continuing concern is therefore necessary to ensure success in current higher education.

3. The role of the student services

Student support and services contribute to the quality of their learning experience and their academic success. Studies show that the most important factors in education quality assurance are: *quality of teaching / learning and service systems and support for students* (Hill et al, 2003). Therefore the importance of support activities for the students is obvious but also presents the management of services with difficulties due to the increasing number of students and their needs.

They help to decrease *the university dropout rate* and *increase the diversity of students experience.* (Tinto, 1993). Without effective student services, students that do not have an academic, emotional and social connection with the institution at cultural level are more likely to give up their studies.

An important role of student services is *to prepare students for active participation in society*. Along with teachers and non-governmental organizations they contribute to increased learning opportunities and community involvement by organizing or promoting internships, experiential units or short-term experiences, integrated into the curricula. (UNESCO, 2002).

These services take a major role in encouraging and establishing open methods of making decisions and rationally resolving conflicts. The manner in which the policies are created, with which the decisions are made and controversial topics are addressed, is as important as the results. The institution *gives students a series of values by the way of addressing policies, decisions and problems*. (Worse, 1987).

Among the services available to students, the most important are those which meet their *academic, personal development and emotional needs* (McInnis, 2004). Studies have shown that a discrepancy exists between the range of services for students officially declared and their accessibility and practical use (Dhillon, McGowan and Wang, 2006). For example, there is an ambiguity regarding the role of the tutor and an inconsistency in terms of its support, which suggests that there is a need to review the practical role that it plays.

The Trends IV study (2005) reveals that in the institutions which encourage active student participation, the implementation of reforms is more effective than in the ones where the student participation involvement has a low level.

While student service functionality differs from one institution to another, certain expectations and responsibilities are common to most university campuses. Some address the institution as a whole, others are specific to students needs and interests.(UNESCO, 2009). Here are the main responsibilities for both types of relations: *student services-academic institution* and *student services-students*, according to the UNESCO manual: *Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education: Global Foundations, Issues and Best Practices:*

On relationship with academic institutions
•   Provides support and explain the values, mission and policies of the institution
•   Participates in leadership and takes responsible decisions
•   Evaluates the social experiences of students in order to improve programs efficiency
•   Establishes policies and programs that contribute to campus safety
•   Supports the institution's values by developing and imposing students standards
•   Supports the student's participation in institutional governance
•   Provides essential services such as admissions, registration, counselling, financial aid, health, housing and so on, in accordance with the mission and objectives of the institution.
•   Represents the institutional resource to work with students individually or in groups.
•   Encourages student-university / college interaction through programs and activities
•   Supports and contributes to the creation of ethnic and cultural diversity
•   Takes a leadership role in crisis situations
•   Is active intellectually and professionally
•   Establishes and maintain effective working relationships with the local community

On relationship with students
•   Assists students in transition to university life
•   Help students to explore and clarify their values
•   Encourages the development of relationships of friendship and a sense of belonging to a campus community
•   Assists in identifying financial aid resources in further education
•   Creates opportunities to expand the cultural and aesthetic horizons of students
•   It teaches students how to solve personal and group conflicts
•   Provides special programs and services for students who have learning difficulties

- Contributes to the understanding and appreciation of ethnic differences, racial or otherwise.
- Creates opportunities for leadership development
- Establishes programs that encourage a healthy lifestyle and reduces misbehaviour
- Provides opportunities for recreation and leisure
- Provides counselling and career guidance, helping to clarify professional goals, exploring options for further study or employment.

4. Challenges

Among the main problems and challenges facing student services are included*: internationalization in higher education, lack of network resource professionals, lack of funds and insufficient funding, and especially student's diverse needs and growth requirements due to increased mass recruitment into of higher education . (UNESCO, 2009).

Universities generally support the importance of student life outside classrooms. However, many of them do not fully address the constantly changing learning environment. Students' expectations, operational pressures and access, demands for services and technology costs have the biggest impact so far (Haugen, 1999).

According to Haugen (1999), to be effective student services require integrated solutions with three major components:

• Strategies based on executive vision, commitment, planning and performance. This requires resources relocation and reorganization, and a rethinking of institutional culture reform and functioning.

• Redesigned processes focused on students and parents in the role of customers served by the university employees (which become service providers). Although the development strategy is based on reporting best practices, it is important that services (which copy good practices) to accommodate the institutional culture, resources and technology.

• Efficient use of tools. Possibilities of modern technology should be exploited in a consistent manner with the strategies, mentioned above, and implemented in a coordinated, targeted, practical and cost.

5. Conclusions

The student services value needs greater recognition, support and development in the interests of all students.

Student services contribute to the quality of students learning experience and their academic success, contribute as well at university dropout rate decrease and to the increase of students life diversity, encouraging and establishing open method of making rational decisions and also resolving conflicts and prepare students for active involvement in society. For the development of this aspects it is required that there is a focus on fostering student involvement as both users and beneficiaries.

The role of student services is influenced by relation with higher education institution and students. The composition of the student group, the knowledge and beliefs of academic staff and administrative staff influences the manner and responsibility in which the student programs and services are delivered.

The World Declaration on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1999) highlights the need to develop student services worldwide. It is imperative that higher education institutions provide services and programs that promote the quality of student life, to meet its needs and to improve learning and success achievements.

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