

## **Interrogating reality in terms of retention and student success at a South Texas University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Student retention has become the most significant issue facing American colleges and universities. For the student, retention has everything to do with academic success and the completion of the most lofty of educational goals—the acquiring of a degree. For the educational institution, college, or university, retention impacts federal funding, fiduciary trust, academic status, and outright institutional survival. This paper explores the importance of interrogating reality through surveys designed to measure retention and attrition factors as they pertain to a South Texas institution, namely Texas A&M University-Kingsville. A review of proactive decisions by the university administration will be considered from a preemptive and initial perspective. These decisions will be reviewed in light of their intended impact on student success and degree completion. Both quantitative and qualitative factors related to student retention and attrition will be reviewed. For any institution serious about positive change, an honest and forthright interrogation of reality must be considered.

Keywords: attrition, retention, non-returning Freshmen, student success, academic success

## **INTRODUCTION**

Student retention has become the most significant issue facing American colleges and universities. For the student, retention has everything to do with academic success and the completion of the most lofty of educational goals—the acquiring of a degree. For the educational institution, college, or university, retention impacts federal funding, fiduciary trust, academic status, and outright institutional survival. For the educational institution that wants change, where to start is the key to successful transformation. For any institution serious about positive change, an honest and forthright interrogation of reality must be considered. Interrogating reality creates an atmosphere of institutional introspection which, in itself, fosters accountability, meaningful opportunities, and aspirational approach to effective change (Alexander & Gardner, 2009). This paper explores the significance of retention and attrition factors as they pertain to a South Texas institution, namely Texas A&M University-Kingsville. A review of proactive decisions by the university administration will be considered from a preemptive and initial perspective. These decisions will be reviewed in light of their intended impact on student success and degree completion. Both quantitative and qualitative factors related to student retention and attrition will be reviewed.

## **THE UNIQUENESS OF THE RETENTION ISSUE**

Understanding the scope of the retention issue for educational institutions has proven to be complicated. Research suggests there is difficulty in assigning a set of common factors for retention, attrition, or success in relationship to student retention. Part of this difficulty may be in the actual definition of terms such as retention, attrition, persistence, graduate, and graduation. Hagedorn (2006) advocated multiple measures for these terms believing the current measures of retention are inadequate and obsolete. Bers and Smith (1991) accurately stated the difficulty in comparing concepts and measures related to student persistence between traditional and non-traditional students. In regards to two-year or community college students, persistence factors are hard to define. According to Tinto (1987), most consistent findings are connected to traditional students in a four-year college or university. Hence, studies such as these seem to suggest each academic institution develop and implement a more unique and customized plan to address student retention and success. Tinto (2006) further concluded that academic institutions must take retention seriously. It must not be seen as simply another problematic issue to be addressed by university administration. It must become a way of life for an institution, deeply engrained in its own academic persona.

Great care must be had when an institution refers to the students as “dropouts.” Astin (1971) accurately stated “the term ‘dropout’ is imperfectly defined” (p. 15). When educators or institutions refer to non-persisting students as dropouts, the onus seems to be on the student without any responsibility of the university taken into consideration.

## **FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS**

Since Texas A&M University-Kingsville is a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), retention among Hispanic/Latino students cannot be overlooked. According to Longerbeam, Sedlacek, and Alatorre (2004), studying those factors affecting Latino retention is complex at best. They found diversity in ethnicity, language, acculturation, and socio-economic status

contributes to the difficulty. Their study also found “there are significant differences between Latino and non-Latino students regarding their attitudes towards diversity, their concerns about academic ability, and their concerns about financing their educations” (Longerbeam et al, 2004, p. 549).

Applying many of these concepts to students across the board can be particularly problematic, especially for first generation college students whether they are Hispanic or non-Hispanic. These are identified as those students whose parents did not graduate from college (Ishitani, 2003). First generation college students have been found to have a more difficult time in their first year of college. Jenkins, Mayazaki, and Janosik (2009) concluded first-gen students (particularly of color) are “less confident in their academic ability and readiness for higher education” (p. 6). Ishitani (2003) found, through a longitudinal study, that “merely offering first-generation students opportunities to attend college may not guarantee them academic success” (p. 447). First-gen Hispanic students have been found to have particular difficulty in their first year of college because of “the conflicting expectations of family members” (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005, p. 48). This may be connected with the stress of finances since many Hispanic families continue to depend on their student’s support (Longerbeam et al, 2004). Budny and Paul (2002) postulated the importance of family support to student success. They found students who go away for their first year of college need both emotional independence and the support of their parents.

Among the elements of risk, Collier and Morgan (2008) discussed the importance of role mastery for first generation students. Many first generation college students have difficulty moving into the role of college student. For them, they have no reference to the role they should play. This role playing then becomes an unexplored area of their academic experience. As Collier and Morgan (2008) asserted, these students have very little cultural capital, a theory postulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. They defined cultural capital as the “preexisting knowledge about interacting successfully in academic settings” (p. 429). In contrast, their peers who have had exposure to college roles and expectations through their parents have a level of cultural capital that fosters role mastery. For university administrators, this concept is vital. As Collier and Morgan (2008) noted:

The importance of this emphasis on role mastery and tacit knowledge is not limited to the individual or social psychological level. In particular, the upper path in our model is an important location where family-based differences in cultural capital can have an impact on academic outcomes for students from different backgrounds. We, thus, argue that it is easier for traditional students entering the university to become “role experts,” due to their greater familiarity with higher education based on their family’s past experiences within that institution. In contrast, first-generation students typically possess relatively lower levels of college student expertise, in that, they cannot rely on parental advice to help them identify and resolve role-based problems or to help them understand the university’s expectations (p. 442).

It must not be assumed all students come to the university with and possess the same academic and/or personal resources. Helping students believe in themselves and discover their inner resources needed to compensate for the lack of academic preparation becomes a compelling priority for both faculty and administration. Pritchard and Wilson (2003) observed

the impact of social and emotional factors on student success. While they believed there were other issues involved in student success, they also believed this success was more likely if students were emotionally healthy.

## **DEVELOPING A PLAN**

As Alexander and Gardner (2001) argued, addressing student retention requires a plan and that plan must begin with a willingness to look honestly and forthrightly at current university policies and procedures. They also emphasized the invaluable role of the faculty and how “retention fatigue” on the part of faculty precludes focusing on the student and more on the subject of retention itself. In other words, if an institution can connect with students on an individual level, the opportunity for the retention issue to improve will greatly increase.

McLeod and Young (2005) referred to a comprehensive program developed at Fayetteville State University called the Freshman Year Initiative (FYI). They proposed the following purpose of this program:

To “meet students where they are and to help them get to where they need to be” reflects a developmental view of students—a view grounded in the belief that all human beings are in a process of becoming, of realizing their full potential in all areas of their lives (p. 74).

The developmental perspective of McLeod and Young (2005) postulated students have the potential to succeed though they are at different maturation levels of life. They further asserted that institutions need to advocate for students and understand academic development is inseparably linked to personal and social development (pp. 74-75). Tinto (2006-2007) was adamant in suggesting retention become part of the academic character and fabric of the institution. Hence, a shared learning environment designed to include the freshman student is vital.

Collaboration with other academic institutions and organizations is vital. No university can expect to have all the answers. Additionally, retention plans which work for one academic institution may or may not work for another. While there are some global perspectives related to retention for academic institutions everywhere, research indicates it is more about creating a unique approach for each particular institution. McLeod and Young (2005) reported the significance of their collaborative efforts with other institutions, organizations, and consultants and the impact on an individual institution’s plan for retention.

At Texas A&M University-Kingsville, the administration has made retention their main priority. With retention and graduation rates well below the state average, they are committed to improving retention rates and increasing student success. The strategy for success is not simply to address retention in order to reverse the trend, but to create a campus-wide atmosphere of student success for the long-term. Starting with a full faculty meeting, the President challenged the faculty to make retention their priority among students. Other initiatives included forming a committee on retention, bringing in a retention expert for further evaluation, moving the priority of retention to the office of Academic Affairs, and restructuring the Freshman convocation weekend at TAMUK (Tallant, January 2011).

Texas A&M University-Kingsville has had a low retention and graduation rate for a number of years. Under the leadership of President Tallant, a five-part plan was developed to reverse this trend:

- First, identify where the University is through a series of surveys.
- Second, hire an expert in retention to provide an objective review of the positive and negative aspects of the university.
- Third, involve the faculty and staff.
- Fourth, create a campus-wide awareness of retention.
- Fifth, implement strategic plans that will become a lifestyle geared toward retention rather than a reactive series of measures that may create administrative fatigue among faculty and staff (Alexander & Gardner, 2009).

To date, all five of these elements have been implemented. A constant and consistent review of the progress of these plans will provide the University with a concerted and long-term strategy to increase both student and institutional success.

### **And the surveys said...**

Before any real changes or target responses can be made, the University must know where it is with its students, faculty, staff, and infrastructure. In other words, it must interrogate reality. Between the Fall semester of 2010 and January of 2011, three major surveys were administered to review key elements related to student retention. Additionally, the surveys sought to provide essential information for planning in enrollment management, student affairs, financial affairs, and academic affairs areas.

First, the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction <sup>TM</sup> survey was conducted jointly with the Institutional Priorities Survey <sup>TM</sup> (IPS). Both the SSI and IPS were administered in Fall 2010 via the web. The Noel-Levitz Company hosted the surveys and sent out invitations and reminders. Six thousand five hundred and seventy-eight (6578) students were invited to complete the SSI. One thousand three hundred and fifty-two (1352) students (21.3% response rate) completed the SSI. Seven hundred and seventy seven (777) full-time employees were invited to complete the IPS. Three hundred fifty (350, 45.0% response rate) employees completed the IPS. Texas A&M University-Kingsville student responses were compared to 89,408 students from 84 Southern 4-year public institutions surveyed with the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory between the Fall of 2007 and the Spring of 2010. Demographic breakdown by class level, race, residency status, and academic profile and other dimensions were obtained. In 2010, 97% of the A&M-Kingsville questions demonstrated a response more positive than the national average. Students were generally satisfied with academic advising, faculty as approachable and knowledgeable in their fields, and the overall sense of pride in the campus itself.

Second, a survey was conducted of non-returning freshmen from the 2009 cohort at TAMUK. A total of 45 respondents to the survey resulted in an initial 19.2% response rate. While it was determined that the actual number of responses was too low to be statistically significant, it was interesting that a pattern of information began to emerge. Of those 45 who responded, only 41 actually completed both parts of the survey. The demographics of those respondents were as follows: 92.7% were ages 18-25, 62.5% were Males, 76.3% were Hispanic, and 44.7% were First Generation students. Seventy-three percent were planning to enroll somewhere in Spring, 2011. The factors in leaving were tabulated according to the descending order of their percentages.

- "Finances" at 27.5%
- "Other" at 30.0%
- "Not ready for school" at 22.5%
- "Family Crisis" at 10.0%
- "Didn't feel connected" at 10.0%

While finances were a significant factor for not returning in the Spring semester, this does not provide a thorough and panoramic explanation. Though finances may have been the ultimate resulting factor, it's likely other issues were at play precipitating the financial dilemma. The lack of preparedness for university life, poor study habits, party mentality, emotional, psychological, and relational issues may have been at play. This could partly explain why the "other" selection was statistically significant. The question then remains whether or not the faculty, staff, and advisors at TAMUK may have been able to recognize these issues and intervene on behalf of the students.

Third, a summary of the survey was completed in January 2011 designed to measure student satisfaction at TAMUK and the potential relationships to retaining students who achieve their academic success. The Fall 2010 Committee on Retention and Students' Satisfaction surveyed students from November to December of 2010. The survey was administered to 4,962 students who were eligible to respond and 1,134 students completed the survey (23% response rate). The study found most students plan to graduate from A&M-Kingsville (92%) and 58% reported plans to graduate in 3-4 years. Students reported their "choice of major" was the greatest attraction to attend TAMUK (60%) but close proximity to home as a nearly equal value of 54%. When questioned about why friends left school, students reported that they felt the reasons students do not continue their education were because of financial difficulties (60%), balancing family and school (43%), and course load (43%). The survey also focused on students' perceived satisfaction with TAMUK services. Lower classmen reported higher satisfaction than upper classmen in the areas of academic advising, admissions, recreation center, school pride, and the Kingsville community. This is an important distinction because lower classmen create the basis for A&M-Kingsville's growth and a foundation for better retention and graduation rates.

### **Aspirational perspectives**

It is the desire and plan of the administration that a longitudinal analysis of student retention, course completion, and graduation rates be conducted for the next several years. These analyses will provide an accurate account of the progress TAMUK is making toward student success and a data-based approach to administrative initiatives designed to enhance and promote an achievement of excellence on campus.

Dr. John Gardner was brought to the campus in early 2011 for an onsite evaluation. In a report provided to the TAMUK administration, Gardner summarized:

What would it take to offer an excellent undergraduate education at TAMUK? What would be the components of such an educational experience, particularly those common to all students? This focus is more aspirational than the one on retention. Retention, while a hugely important public policy goal and one of the most common benchmarks for public accountability and performance, remains nevertheless a minimum standard, a C-minus and a pulse. The conversation must instead be about: what do we want students to do, to learn, to

experience and how do we deliver those experiences, and by whom? This proposed focus will be more aspirational; will be deemed to have more educational value; will be more embracing of the work of the faculty and will resonate better with their values as opposed to the more “corporate” metrics that are suggested by the focus on “retention” (Gardner, 2011, p. 5).

## **CONCLUSION**

As TAMUK administrators face the daunting task of reversing retention rates, this study affirms their proactive plans to address freshman preparedness and the major issues incoming students face. Creating a campus-wide awareness, enhancing Freshman convocation weekend, creating a climate of connectedness, reviewing the Freshman process from application to student status, and innovative utilization of technology are vital to the plans of success for Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Additionally, as students, faculty, and universities grapple with complex contemporary issues related to retention and student success, serious institutional introspection will need to be conducted in order to keep up with the ever-changing educational and academic landscape. Honest and frank evaluations of the progress toward reversing student attrition must remain the constant of the future. If an institution doesn’t know where it is, how can it determine where it is going?

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