CULTURAL CLUES: UNDERSTANDING THE “WHYS” OF INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND STUDENT OUTCOME DATA

Comments Offered to the Walmart Foundation, AIHEC, HACU, and NAFEO

Student Success Collaborative

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GREETINGS!

There are so many reasons I am pleased to be here, please indulge me a bit of personal history

1967 off to UIUC

1968 Project 300 500

1971 C·H·A·N·C·E

1979 Doctorate in Measurement and Evaluation

1984 - 2002 Leadership positions in higher education

2000 Director of State and Partnership GEAR UP Grants {$20,000,000 & kids from 12 communities - Summer Enrichment Program - Peer Mentoring Programs

2002 - 2005 Programs for access and opportunity

2000’s -RCEI; 2012 CREA

2009 - Developmental Perspectives on Human Diversity

A few ironies:

• Many students who fit your special mission will naively feel that they do not and may even be intimidated by your historical mission because ethnic identities are so contested today

• Evidence and accountability favor the status quo and always will, because definitions must seek common denominators unless you create and validate your own {Until the lion has their own historian, tails of the hunt will feature the hunter - Be the lion’s historians!}

• Not all data is evidence; evidence is data with a purpose! (Yvonna Lincoln)
LOCATING THIS CONVERSATION

• My **Worldview** - comes from what you have just heard, my personal history and my experience with recruitment and retention programs

• My **vantage point** - on this topic was shaped by this worldview and my external relationship to this project - I have few specifics or concrete predispositions about your work

• My **voice** - should be thought of as similar to an interested and invested bystander with cogent experiences
In our evidence driven higher education culture extensive data is collected; some of it qualifies as evidence useful and influential in decision-making, most does not. We have many tools that provide indicators of what our outcomes are, yet few that explain why the outcomes look as they do.

• How can we gain a better understanding of the factors that really affect student retention?
• Can program evaluation lead to more data that qualifies as evidence?

This presentation will focus on the questions for which we need better answers, and the resources and strategies that may help us find them.
PROBLEMS I SEE WITH THE CURRENT APPROACH TO DATA

• Using Operational Definitions That Do Not Fit The Experience Because They:
  • Are too general or distant from the interventions
  • Are not linked to a theory of change
  • Are not timely or persuasive
  • Use a unit of analysis that does not match the intervention
Typically our goals in retention programs include:

- Institutional policy revision and/or transformation to support student success
- Adding to the general understanding of strategies that work for particular populations, and at particular types of institutions
- Improving retention practice and reducing barriers
- Taking students from where they are, rather than selecting only those with an incoming success profile
- Adding value to student preparation and skills, even when ultimate goal of retention is not met
A SIMPLE DATA CONCEPTUALIZATION SCHEME

{SO YOU CAN ACCOMMODATE MANDATED DATA COLLECTION, BUT ALSO COLLECT WHAT YOU NEED FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT}

An Overall Data Collection, Self-Study, and Program Evaluation Plan

College or University Data Needs
- Data that speaks to accountability and meeting campus goals

Intervention Level Data Needs
- Data that monitors contextual factors; Implementation data

Data That Explores Outcomes
- Individual student level data {because that is the level at which retention occurs}
REMEMBER THOSE OLD FILE CABINETS?

Thinking Evaluatively Can Be Facilitated Very Inexpensively
A Simple Data Conceptualization Scheme

{Assign a staff person(s) to serve as curator of these files}

- This folder might include data in a cohort structure so that each group could be analyzed separately and combined with other groups.
- Cohorts could be formed based upon any clear criteria for example each year a new cohort could be formed if the key question was changes in how the groups were treated and the related results; or by other characteristics that might be meaningful as a unit of analysis i.e. returning or older students, STEM and non-STEM students, etc.
- Data that goes into the folder could include memos, pictures, newsletter articles, counselor notes, program event flyers, etc.
A SIMPLE DATA CONCEPTUALIZATION SCHEME

{ARTIFACTS CAN BE ANY “DATA WITH A PURPOSE” THINGS THAT RESPOND TO THE THEME OF THE FOLDER}

• This folder might include data comparing students in a special program to students who are under general admissions
  • It would be important to anticipate the most useful scheme for selection comparison groups, and this should be guided by a theory about what factors relate to retention, and avoid the use of categories or labels that are not linked to actual retention decisions such as race, gender, etc.
  • The comparisons should promote or examine retention strategies actually being used, so that it collects data on effectiveness
  • Other organizing schemes could include financial aide portfolios, or admissions criteria

Cohort-Based Retention Data  Cohort-Based Comparisons  Survey Data on Concurrent Events  Selected Longitudinal Case Studies  Detailed Test Scores, Attendance & Compliance Data

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A SIMPLE DATA CONCEPTUALIZATION SCHEME

I recommend combining qualitative and quantitative data by doing interviews before or after use of survey instruments.

- This folder might include interview and survey data for all students at the institution so that concurrent events can be factored into the retention equation. UMCP for example found that some past cohorts of students had such a negative experience they were much less likely to donate money or support the school in other ways. Issues that impact all students should be factored into retention analysis and examined for differential impact on the targeted retention groups.
- This may be thought of as a baseline calculator to allow analysis to appropriately acknowledge factors that may influence ultimate retention numbers.
A SIMPLEx DATA CONCEPTUALIZATION
SCHEME
{THIS WOULD BE A SMALL NUMBER CHOSEN STRATEGICALLY TO GIVE INSIGHT INTO WHY OUTCOMES LOOK THE WAY THEY DO}

- This folder provides qualitative data to help with interpretation of the quantitative data collected elsewhere. Case studies would be great, but can be time consuming so notes from survival skills classes might prove useful. Theme assignments from English classes could be used to track trends and issues of interest. Progressive assignments (completed in serial fashion and stored a student portfolio i.e. task stream or equivalent).
- Another option here would be virtual discussions or collaborate sessions.
- The goal might include better documentation of some of the distal event and environmental factors influencing student success.
- Perhaps Mindset & Skill Profile Data could be included.

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A SIMPLE DATA CONCEPTUALIZATION SCHEME

{REQUIRED DATA MAY NOT REFLECT THE VALUES OF THE PROGRAM BUT MUST BE COLLECTED; AUGMENT THIS WITH EVIDENCE SUPPORTING YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE}

- This folder could include comprehensive quantitative and demographic data accumulated throughout application, admissions, and retention efforts.
- The profiles created would provide a way to select peers for benchmarking and goals for performance periods.
- Note that these data will often import “values” and “priorities” that may not be compatible with intervention program values. This folder is the place to note gaps in philosophy and potential problems of analysis they cause. For example, a program may be student success oriented and count transfers to other colleges as a success even though the student has not been retained at the initial institution of enrollment, other programs would not.
DATA ON INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES AND OVERALL RETENTION SUCCESS

SURE TO ALSO LOOK AT HOW YOUR PROGRAM FITS INTO THE INSTITUTION AND COLLECT EVIDENCE OF ANY SHIFTS IN THIS RELATIONSHIP.

- What grounds your institutions philosophy regarding student retention? Is the goal to only recruit students that can be successful; take students from wherever they stand academically and support them becoming credentialed graduates; serve a public, tribal, or community mandate; or come combination of the above?

- What tracking data could provide evidence of the extent to which the institutions policies and practices support the philosophy or mission statement?

- Where does the retention process fall in institutional priorities and what supports that ranking? Is it driven by external or internal sanctions?

- Can you follow the money and find retention where you would expect it in institutional priorities?
DATA ON THE “REAL WORLD” OF YOUR STUDENTS

Since College is never the only thing going on in a student’s life:

• What information do you collect to help with understanding the other important factors?

• Is there a version of the Beloit College Mindset list for the students you serve? {Developing a list like this would be a great project for students, because it would help them understand how their mindset might be different from others on campus such as instructors or students from other cultures}

The Mindset List for the Class of 2016

• They should keep their eyes open for Justin Bieber or Dakota Fanning at freshman orientation.
• They have always lived in cyberspace, addicted to a new generation of “electronic narcotics.”
• Michael Jackson’s family, not the Kennedys, constitutes “American Royalty.”
• If they miss The Daily Show, they can always get their news on YouTube.
• Bill Clinton is a senior statesman of whose presidency they have little knowledge.
• Exposed bra straps have always been a fashion statement, not a wardrobe malfunction to be corrected quietly by well-meaning friends.
• They have lived in an era of instant stardom and self-proclaimed celebrities, famous for being famous.

http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/
INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS ARE THE **MOST VALID UNIT**
OF ANALYSIS IN RETENTION STUDIES - THAT IS
THE LEVEL WHERE DECISIONS ARE MADE - HOW
WELL DO WE UNDERSTAND THEIR DECISIONS?

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DEFINING SUCCESS ONE STUDENT AT A TIME

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These factors shape the worldview of your students and create similarities and differences between them.
A USEFUL IMAGE

These factors are evolving during your retention efforts but you do not control them.
These factors comprise your retention effort, be sure to think about both the intentional plans you have as well as serendipity and unintended issues both positive and negative!
Immediate Outcomes
Stable Outcomes
Long term Changes

Contextual Factor
Distal Events
Proximal Events

Concurrent Events
Planned Intervention

Immediate Outcomes
Stable Outcomes
Long term Changes

These outcome definitions should match your retention theory of change
When students go through your program, why are some successful and others not? To be evidence, data must relate to the questions you want to answer.
HOW MUCH DATA DO YOU COLLECT ON CONCURRENT EVENTS & ISSUES STUDENTS ARE FACING?

These “events” are possible threats to student success, to what degree can you document what they are with data and build coping resources into your retention initiative? {?}
EMERGING CONCEPTS TO FACTOR INTO RETENTION STRATEGIES

Many of the popular retention initiatives focus on making the institution more responsive, the advising more intrusive, and the instruction more tailored, but individual student factors may be much more impactful.

What dominates the worldview of the students you seek to retain, and what tools do we have to better understand their worldview and its consequences?

Consider:

• Self-Theories, Stereotype Threat, & Attribution Style

• Student Engagement Factors - Social Myopia & Hyperopia
SELF THEORIES

Students, like everyone else, have private theories about themselves. These self-theories reflect what they believe about their own talents and abilities. In student retention efforts, if we only pay attention to changing the institution to support the student, we have ignored the most important factor in student success—how does the student help or hurt their own academic achievement through the messages and coaching they provide. When taking a test, what messages is the student whispering to themselves about their level of preparation, what it means if they succeed or fail, who is responsible for their success or failure.

These self-theories or beliefs about oneself vary from student-to-student but we can realistically program retention to help because there are patterns we see in students so economical interventions can be designed to respond to those patterns.

The way we work to retain students should be grounded in an understanding of how patterns emerge that lead to reduced odds of retention and graduation.
I find the following particularly important in understanding the factors related to student performance and retention:

1. **Stereotype Threat** – When a student feels that one of their characteristics involves a stigma, emphasizing that characteristic can impact their performance.

2. **Attribution Theory & Locus of Control** – When an outcome occurs, such as a poor grade on a test, these theories help explain what happens when a student does not take ownership over that outcome.

3. **Social Identity** – This includes the work of many theorists as they explore how we come to identify with the prominent groups that comprise our social identity: Race, Social Class, Ethnicity, Disability Status, Sexual Preference, Religion, Political Ideology, and Personality Traits like introversion/extroversion are all a part of this complex social identity.

4. **Mindset** – A key factor in motivation and resilience is mindset. Therefore, it becomes a key factor in success in higher education.
MINDSET

Grows out of the work of Carol Dweck

The students who thrive are not necessarily the ones who come in with the perfect scores. It’s the ones who love what they’re doing and go at it vigorously...Colleges could improve their students’ learning, if they relentlessly encouraged them to think about their mental skills as malleable, rather than as properties fixed at birth. No more saying, I can't major in chemistry because I’m just not wired for math. — Carol Dweck

Mindsets are beliefs—beliefs about yourself and your most basic qualities. Think about your intelligence, your talents, your personality. Are these qualities simply fixed traits, carved in stone and that’s that? Or are they things you can cultivate throughout your life?

- People with a **fixed mindset** believe that their traits are just givens. They have a certain amount of brains and talent and nothing can change that. If they have a lot, they’re all set, but if they don’t... So people in this mindset worry about their traits and how adequate they are. They have something to prove to themselves and others.

- People with a **growth mindset**, on the other hand, see their qualities as things that can be developed through their dedication and effort. Sure they’re happy if they’re brainy or talented, but that’s just the starting point. They understand that no one has ever accomplished great things—not Mozart, Darwin, or Michael Jordan—without years of passionate practice and learning.

http://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/themindsets/index.html
HOW A STUDENT MIGHT SOUND IF THEY HAVE A FIXED VERSUS CHANGEABLE VIEW OF ABILITIES AND APPROACH A CHALLENGING CLASS, HIT A SNAG, AND FACED CRITICISM*

**Fixed View**
- Are you sure you can do it? Maybe you don’t have the talent.
- What if you fail—you’ll be a failure.
- If you don’t try, you can protect yourself and keep your dignity.

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- This would have been a snap if you really had talent.
- It’s not my fault. It was something or someone else’s fault.

**Changeable View**
- I’m not sure I can do it now, but I think I can learn to with time and effort.
- Most successful people had failures along the way.
- If I don’t try, I automatically fail. Where’s the dignity in that?

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- That is so wrong. Basketball wasn’t easy for Michael Jordan and science wasn’t easy for Thomas Edison. They had a passion and put in tons of effort.
- If I don’t take responsibility, I can’t fix it. Let me listen—however painful it is—and learn whatever I can.

Mindset contributes to the students' worldview or viewpoint, along with culture, and key aspects of their past...this is how it impacts perceptions!
VIEWPOINT DISCUSSION

• Viewpoint is resistant to change: new material has to be integrated, accommodated, altered, or rejected – some things literally cannot be seen.

• Getting students (or anyone) to see that their viewpoint is not the only one is easy; getting them to see that theirs is not the norm is much harder.

• As humans we even re-write our history to better justify the place we now stand and the attitudes we hold.
IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVES

• Mindset, stereotype threat, and strength of self- and social-identity are important contributors to understanding student decision making; they give us a better understanding of student perceptions of what they face and what their options are.

• Students cannot implement a survival skill that they have been taught, unless they perceive the situation as calling for that skill.

• Differences and similarities in human characteristics reflect opposite sides of the same coin; without similarities differences would have no meaning, and vice versa.

• All of our observed student behavior is defined relative to other possible behaviors, and we know some strategies are more successful than others.
Self-Identity As Trivial Pursuit

- It is useful to use images such as the game *Trivial Pursuit* to make self-identity formation and maintenance concrete.

- Picture illustrates collection of identity components as pie shapes.
A very useful graphic for helping students and faculty think about the many components of self and social identity.
EQUITY BELIEFS OBSERVED IN STUDENTS

*These views are what other students will reflect in class and often result in the kinds of **Microaggressions** that drive students away. What kinds of attitudes do students in your institution face?*

**Conservative**
- Issues of equity reflect overblown and exaggerated claims, providing cover for poor personal choices.

**Colorblind**
- US is now a "race transcendent" nation; future improvements in equity require race neutral policies.

**Progressive**
- Racism, sexism, & classism continue largely unchecked in US society.

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*Microaggressions are small injuries or insults that often are not intentional, but they can accumulate and cause great distress. For example a teacher who invalidates a student’s feelings when they refuse to acknowledge them, or reading about an event in history and knowing that it does not portray your ancestors correctly.*

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Student retention works when we are able to be responsive to the factors that really matter

✓ Moving students to a place of viewing their identity as growth and success oriented is an ambitious but worthy and achievable goal. If they are also drawn into a sense of community, where mutual support exists we gain new retention partners as well.

✓ Understanding the link between our success in retention and pertinent social science theories provides a way to gain acknowledgement for interventions that work.

✓ The real contribution of a project may be lessons-learned that were not envisioned when the program was designed...they emerged along the way.

The Student Success Collaborative is positioned to contribute tremendously to the state of the art in student retention providing that the right evidence is collected, retained, and made accessible to help us and others understand the “whys of our outcomes.”
RECOMMENDED RESOURCE MATERIALS

ACADEMIC RESOURCES OF POSSIBLE INTEREST


WEBSITES

• A WONDERFUL WEBSITE WITH LOTS OF MATERIAL ON SELF-EFFICACY (HTTP://WWW.UKY.EDU/~EUSHE2/PAJARES/SELF-EFFICACY.HTML)

PROGRAMS

• SEE NEXT SLIDE
Brings together teams that have a student success-focused project in mind and provides support drawn from relevant social science and learning theories.

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