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THE ROLE OF FACULTY IN FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' ORIENTATIONS AND ANTICIPATED CONTINUANCE

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Abstract

The first year of university is significant with respect to students' orientations toward university and further study. While the correlation between student engagement and retention is well-established, literature specifically addressing self-reported concerns of first-year university students is sparse. The literature highlights interpersonal communication between students and faculty, beyond the communication of course material, as influencing students' commitment, and even decisions, regarding continuance. First-year students would further benefit from the identification of strategies (independent of curriculum) that faculty can implement in the classroom for positive impact on students' orientations, and consequently, anticipated continuance. Among faculty who teach first-year classes, there is also a need to increase awareness of first-year students' orientations toward university.

Keywords

first-year, retention, engagement, faculty-student interaction

Teaching means any activity that has the conscious intention of, and potential for, facilitating learning in another. (Robert Leamnsion, 1999, p. 3)

Introduction

The origins of our contemporary concept of "teacher" are somewhat amusing given the model that was in place for past millennia: the term pedagogue originates from the Greek word paidagogos, meaning "slave who escorts boys to school and generally supervises them." The term evolved to incorporate the notion of "leader." Seeking a middle ground might lead us to embrace a concept of "teacher" that falls somewhere between "slave" and "leader." Reflecting on the origins of the word pedagogue at least leads us to reflect on the potential roles of teachers to support, to care, and to enable.

The U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported that slightly over half of students who enroll in four-year degree programs complete them within six years. Although American, these statistics highlight a need to examine factors impacting the retention rates of students at universities and to discuss factors capable of mitigating student attrition. Specifically, Tinto (2006) has emphasized the centrality of the first-year experience to student retention, particularly with respect to interpersonal contacts (pp. 3, 8). This paper will serve to review the literature in the areas of first-year student orientations and causes of attrition, highlighting a need for increased insight into the worldviews of first-year students.¹

First-year orientations

Robert Leamnsion (1999) describes first-year students as "the group most in need of attention and so the greatest challenge" (p. xi). He calls for instructors of first-year students to go beyond curricular concerns and evaluate "how they teach, and what effects their pedagogy has on their students" (p. 3). He notes that teachers should take into account "students' desires" (p. 6), yet where can students safely describe these desires without concern of being judged by their peers or instructors? Barefoot (2000) also refers to the "significant unresolved issue [of] the nature of first-year instruction within the disciplines" (p. 17). Heisserer and Parette (2002) and Hurford et al. (2017) observed that some students have difficulty adjusting to the academic challenges of university or feel they do not belong. Lee, Olson, Locke, & Michelson (2009) agreed, noting that beginning university is often a time of flux for many students. Having to relocate to pursue their studies, being separated from family and

1 This literature review was conducted for the pilot study, T. Laidlaw, "First-year student orientations, and non-curricular techniques to mitigate stressors." Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, N.S.

friends, adjusting to university life, and meeting the expectations of families and faculty are all sources of stress for beginning students (Barr, 2007; Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Kerr, Johnson, Gans, & Krumrine, 2004; Nipcon et al., 2006–2007). Literature specifically addressing self-reported concerns of first-year university students, however, is sparse.

Rosenberg (1971) conducted a comparative study of medical students, observing discussion groups of students during the beginning and end of their first year. In-depth observations were made about impacts of the first-year experience on self-image (p. 214); the author used the term “violence” to describe the impacts of the educational program on students’ self-images. Impacts Rosenberg observed included “feelings of inferiority,” powerlessness, and the “loss of a feeling of autonomy.” Also in the context of medical school, Coburn and Jovaisas (1975) specifically studied “perceived sources of stress” (p. 589) for students in their first year. Perceived failure was ranked highly, and marginalized or visible minority students indicated experiencing higher levels of stress. The authors observed that “feelings of stress” (p. 589) correlated with impacts of stress, specifically, consideration of abandonment and sick days. The authors highlighted the study’s findings with respect to underlining the “importance of students’ fears concerning their own inadequacy or incompetence” (p. 594). While medical school shares certain characteristics with other academic contexts (i.e., learning expectations, exams, grades, new standards for academic performance), the exigencies of medical school are decidedly unique. It is interesting, however, that studies such as these focused on first-year cohorts are otherwise rare.

Causes of abandonment

Reasons for attrition vary from the obvious, such as a low grade-point average or financial problems (Brown, 2014; Hoffman, 2016; Hurford, Ivy, Winters, & Eckstein, 2017; Reason, 2003), to factors that result in some students being more vulnerable than others to dropping out after their first year of study. For example, Heisserer and Parette (2002) noted that students with disabilities, students from ethnic minorities, or those who were economically disadvantaged were at higher risk to leave university after their first year. Brown (2014) observed that parents’ education, occupations, and income levels were predictors of student retention, as was the student’s reason for attending university.

As well as these stressors, many students are entering university with identified mental health issues (Pedrelli, Nyer, Young, Zulauf, & Wilens, 2015). Bean (1985) suggested that student retention rates were higher when students were socially integrated into university life, yet achieving such integration (now commonly referred to as engagement) is daunting for students with anxiety issues. Likewise, Strahan (2013) noted that a significant number of university students have high

levels of social anxiety; those with anxiety who tend to control their emotions are less likely to connect with others or seek support and are at greater risk to drop out.

Hunt and Eisenberg (2010), however, noted that despite the increased prevalence of students with mental health and transitioning problems, many universities still lack the resources and policies to adequately meet these students' needs. Indeed, Hubbell (2016) interviewed experts in the field of student retention who noted that many institutions are reactive rather than proactive. Universities focus their retention efforts on determining which students are academically at risk without considering the personal and social experiences universities are providing and promoting to demonstrate that they care about and support all students. In fact, Gaughf et al. (2013) found that while approximately 60% of faculty and students felt that counselling and support services were necessary, only 25% of students, and even fewer faculty, knew about these services or how to access them. This situation is unfortunate given that Simpson and Ferguson (2012; 2014) found that students with mental health issues are reluctant to disclose sensitive information to faculty or others fearing prejudice, stereotypic reactions, or the appearance of being less able than their fellow students. Because of the concerns associated with the risk factors for dropping out of university, many families and potential students are now looking beyond universities' academic programs to examine their existing supports and services to help students cope with transitioning to university and/or mental illnesses (Bishop, 2010). Some universities are responding by offering supports and programs such as the Freshman 5 to Thrive course (Melnyk et al., 2013) and peer mentoring programs (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Larose, 2011) to select groups of students. Also on a positive note, a study by Simpson and Ferguson (2014) indicated that students with mental health problems who availed themselves of student support services had higher grade point averages and were more likely to continue their university studies than students who did not access these supports.

The disconnect between many of today's students and the universities they attend exacerbates existing problems (O'Keefe, 2013). Increasingly, and certainly in the context of our own institution (Church, 2018), students are working and completing their studies on a part-time basis, completing courses via distance technology off campus, or studying in a foreign country. The culture of academia alone can lead students to feel isolated; there is no sense of belonging to the university community (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003). Heisserer and Parette (2002) concluded that students who do not feel connected are less likely to remain in university. Challenges are compounded by today's diverse campuses, where many students attend classes only online (Patterson and McFadden, 2009). The anxieties associated with approaching faculty or fellow students and meeting expectations add

to entering students' loneliness and sense of isolation, as well as increasing the likelihood of these students dropping out (O'Keefe, 2013).

Influences on retention

The correlation between student engagement and retention has been well-established, particularly by the United States' National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a long-running tool operating out of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University (see for example Shinde, 2010). Engagement is defined as activities such as participating in class presentations, group work, and cocurricular activities (Hughes & Pace, 2003, p. 1). External motivations toward engagement such as encouragement from the institution to become involved in university life are also relevant (Hughes & Pace, 2003, p. 1). Kuh (2003) observed that "smaller schools" (as distinguished from large universities; p. 26) accomplish engagement better. Consequently, Kuh pointed out that by having means to determine which students are disengaged, universities could make tangible progress toward retention by taking steps to integrate these students. Data collected through the NSSE, however, is unable to measure "the quality of active and collaborative" pedagogies, but rather only the degree to which students report taking part in such activities (Kuh, 2003, p. 26).

Carton and Goodboy (2015) examined the relationship between psychological illnesses and the degree to which students engaged in class communications. The authors found that symptoms of stress and depression affected students' "attentiveness and responsiveness" (p. 183). Thus, students' involvement in class correlated positively with cognitive learning and higher grades. Attentiveness was impacted by anxiety. The authors urge teachers to be critically aware of the range of mental illness symptoms potentially present in a cohort and implement strategies to spur and maintain involvement.

In their 1999 study, Ramsay, Barker, and Jones observed that "positive incidents" in the first year of university "give a powerful sense of direction to students" and "were readily identifiable and appear to contribute to adjustment and learning processes" (p. 137). Similarly, other researchers (Myers, 2004; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009; Tinto, 1993) have maintained that positive relationships between students and faculty and a nurturing environment are essential in creating a sense of belonging and improving student retention rates. Myers et al. (2016) studied the nature of students' relationships and perceptions with the university as a whole and suggested that their findings pointed to "interpersonal relationships with other organizational members [as] foundational" to organizational identification (p. 226). Students who identified with their university were more satisfied with their experience and more likely to continue their studies at that institution (Myers, Davis, Schreuder & Seibold, 2016). Data were collected from junior and senior students (n=555) over four semesters using a number of measures. Results revealed that students identified with

institutions that encourage interpersonal relationships, ongoing communication, belongingness and uniqueness, and image building. Such institutions engendered feelings of trustworthiness and pride, ensuring high retention rates (Myers et al., 2016).

"Getting to know professors" (Myers et al., p. 226) was one element often identified by students as influencing their degree of commitment to the university. However, many students find face-to-face contact with faculty anxiety-provoking, especially if it is of a personal nature (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharaya, 2010). Yet Schneider (2006) notes, "For many, the organization (university) is its members and activities" (cited in Myers et al., 2016, p. 226). Positive identification with the university could be enduring and thus significant over the long term with respect to alumni, donors, and advocates. Hubbell (2016) suggests engaging staff, faculty, and students in a dialogue regarding student retention, beginning with looking at ways to enhance on-campus social and academic interactions between students and faculty.

Remarkably, Lundquist, Spalding and Landrum (2002) established that faculty may directly influence students' decisions regarding whether to remain in their programs or abandon them. More than 700 currently enrolled undergraduate students were surveyed, and a proportion of 15.3% "agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I have thought about leaving the university because of faculty attitudes and behaviors'" (p. 131). The researchers emphasized the consequences of this finding: that faculty directly impact students via "their own attitudes and behaviors in the teaching environment" (p. 132, emphasis in original). This seems to presage Kuh's (2003) observation that "students will go beyond what they think they can do under certain conditions, one of which is that their teachers expect, challenge, and support them to do so" (p. 28). Tinto (2006) also notes that class "is, for many students, the one place, perhaps the only place, where they meet each other and faculty. If involvement does not occur there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere" (p. 4). Tinto makes a strong case for the impact of faculty interactions on retention of first-year students, while noting the irony that university faculty typically lack formal education in teaching (pp. 5, 7).

Faculty characteristics influencing retention

A teacher's communication competence and perceived degree of involvement impacts students' motivation and learning (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Frymier and Houser (2000) cite previous literature (e.g., Andersen, 1979; Norton, 1977; Sorensen, 1989; Teven & McCroskey, 1997) indicating that the dynamic in place between teachers and students impacts learning. The authors conducted two studies to evaluate: a) how students conceptualized the importance of a teacher's communication skills; and b) how students conceptualized the teacher's use of communication skills with respect to learning and motivation (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Communicative elements

perceived by students as having the greatest impact on learning and motivation were “referential skill” (the teacher’s facility in communicating the course material); ego support; and immediacy (how a teacher demonstrates their degree of involvement with and commitment to students; Frymier & Houser, 2000, pp. 213–215). Most important to effective teaching were referential skill, ego support, and conflict management. Overall, the authors’ work highlighted the degree to which relational elements (as distinct from a teacher’s communicative competence with respect to their subject area) are perceived as important by students (Frymier and Houser, 2000, p. 216). Frisby and Gaffney (2015) also correlated immediacy with learning.

Hoffman (2014) posited that both faculty and students gain when they engage in formal and informal interactions. Positive student/faculty interactions can result in enhanced academic achievement, personal growth, and higher student retention. Conversely, faculty are obligated to participate in scholarly activities, teach, engage in department and university services as well as professional activities, greatly reducing their time to interact with students. Such a dynamic ignores one objective of what Tinto (2006) considered the two primary domains of universities: the academic and the social domains. Tinto stated that satisfaction with an institution requires successful navigation of both domains. As well, Tinto suggested that positive interactions between faculty and students not only impacted students’ perceptions of academic programs, but also enriched their university experience and improved retention rates. Hoffman (2014) also contended that positive interactions between faculty and students could lead to successful university experiences in both the academic and social domains.

Students have higher commitment to their university when they view faculty members as interested in their students and participating in social engagement (Braxton, Jones, Hischy, & Hartley, 2008). Likewise, Strage (2000) noted that persistence in college was related to positive rapport with faculty, especially if students saw the faculty as credible, supportive, and open to discussing academic-related issues (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). More recently, Sidelinger, Frisby, and Heisler (2016) explored factors important to student success and retention. Their results indicated that faculty rapport was related to student out-of-class communications (discussion before and after class, meeting during office hours, e-mails) and students’ willingness to access universities’ support services and resources. Such interactions helped students develop a sense of connectedness with their institution and increased retention rates. Similar results were reported by Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Bolkan, and Griffin (2015) who found that students were more interactive, communicative, and willing to talk with faculty outside of class when their instructors were focused on student learning rather than grades, from students’ perspectives.

Faculty impact on first-year students

The high percentage of students dropping out of university has caused universities to re-examine how they assist students with the transition from school to university and the types of supports and services they provide to students who are at risk (Brown, 2014; O'Keefe, 2013). Many students are overwhelmed by changes in expectations and by the culture of universities (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Melnyk et al., 2013; Myers et al., 2016); yet little work has been performed to identify self-reported orientations of first-year students. As Tinto (2006) notes, "Knowing why students leave does not tell us...why students persist" (p. 6).

Several researchers (Bean, 1985; Hubbell, 2016; Simpson & Ferguson, 2014) have suggested that students who feel a sense of belonging, who connect with peers or faculty or others at the university, are less likely to drop out. It is clear that social integration or engagement directly impacts retention, and institutions are urged to proactively identify disengaged students (Kuh, 2003). The literature also highlights a need for faculty to recognize the likelihood of mental health conditions among first-year students and to consider strategies to engage these students (Carton & Goodboy, 2015).

Most strikingly, the literature highlights the impact of faculty on first-year students (Tinto, 2006; Hoffman, 2014), from influencing how students perceive the institution as a whole (Myers et al., 2016), to influencing decisions regarding abandonment (Lundquist, Spalding & Landrum, 2003). Limited research, however, has been conducted examining faculty/student interventions to support students as they learn to adjust and cope with the demands of university (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Research has shown that elements such as immediacy, rapport, and instructor humour impact student learning. Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Bolkan, and Griffin (2015) found, for example, that teacher humour was "a positive predictor" (p. 44) for learning, effort, in-class engagement, and communication beyond the classroom. However, these characteristics vary according to individual instructors' personalities and teaching styles.

Given the centrality of faculty impact on first-year students, there is a need not only to impress upon faculty an awareness of the first-year context and of the impacts of teaching, but also to broaden the research focus from student characteristics that predict academic success to instructor strategies that can positively impact first-year students' orientations toward their studies. In short, how do faculty and faculty-led classroom dynamics and characteristics impact first-year university students' orientations toward their university experience and their anticipated continuance? This question suggests that instructors can strategically implement non-curricular elements in their instruction in order to positively impact orientations of first-year students toward university.

We noted that first-year students repeatedly mentioned sources of anxiety and concern with respect to starting university; for example, concerns about being liked by their professors,

doing well on assignments, and being able to make friends (personal communications). Yet by the end of term, students conveyed that course-related occurrences (for example, “improv” theatrical demonstrations involving student volunteers, experiences of being in learning teams) had positively impacted their thinking (personal communications). The literature points to a need to study whether faculty can strategically implement strategies independent of a specific curriculum — strategies aimed at mitigating the typical concerns of first-year students. As students commonly report loneliness, for example, the implementation of learning teams that provide students with a ready-made social network could conceivably mitigate loneliness.

While surveys such as the NSSE are valuable in clarifying trends and correlations in cohorts across the continent, there is also value for individual institutions in approaching research on retention from an “emic” versus “etic” perspective: that is, to identify the “lived realities” (Wright, 2015) of our own students. Students are not black boxes: we know this because we were students once. Under appropriate conditions — where students feel supported and enabled — they will share their perspectives. Can we not ask students, “What do you wish instructors of first-year students knew about you?” Perhaps simply giving them an opportunity to tell us will move us toward Leamson’s call for teachers to take into account “students’ desires” at the first-year level (1999, p. 6).

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