Chapter 14

Examining University Retention Efforts of Non–Traditional Students

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ABSTRACT

Many non-traditional and first-generation students face multiple limitations to successful academic achievement, like the case of the student referred to in this chapter named Sarah. A primary strength that Sarah identified, related to academic success, was her ability to provide emotional and financial stability for her family. To accommodate her full-time schedule and parenting demands, Sarah expressed a need to learn through distance education from a research-based, state university. Adult learners, like Sarah, are more likely to seek online instructional delivery services. They often do this to as they seek educational credentials and job enhancement for the workplace. Despite the increased usage of web-based course delivery, many students favor traditional learning environments in the university (Adams & Corbett, 2010). Thus, personal, academic, and social factors may determine non-traditional students' preference in learning methods.

BACKGROUND

The University of Sarah's interest was founded in 1890 as an agricultural and mechanical institution. At its inception in 1896, the first graduates were male. In 1957, the university was acknowledged as the state university with technical branches and academic programs that serve the needs of the community. Assessable to the immediate community and surrounding towns, the university serves males and females on four campuses with accredited bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees in various studies.

The university student population consists of 51% in-state student body, 20% out-of-state, and 29% international students. Minorities comprise of 40% of the population.

At this institution, non-traditional students have one additional benefit. Non-traditional older students at the university receive personal staff and faculty attention. Through their identified and declared majors, students, receive unique attention, motivation, and respectful services such as library instruction, student union facilities, advance learning through cultural events, and participation in student groups/organizations. One tenet of the university is the engagement in research. Many in student services and through social networks work to improve the quality of life for non-traditional students and increase college retention. Lastly, community members are provided the opportunity to increase their knowledge through noncredit training, personal-enrichment opportunities provided by the university. The purpose of this case is to explore experiences of non-traditional students and possible institutional response. The experiences of non-traditional students and institutional responses to these experiences are all areas for examination and data analysis by an institutional research office.

The Case

Sarah B. is a 54-year-old, single, African-American mother of three adolescent children. Sarah currently resides in a low income, inner city apartment complex and is employed full-time outside the home. After considerable contemplation and elimination of fear related to academic failure, she decided to return to college and complete a bachelor's degree in accounting. Sarah identified multiple limitations related to her academic pursuits and successful continuation. Such limitations include financial concerns to offset the costs of books and tuition. Since Sarah previously dropped out of college at the age of 22, she is apprehensive of the academic and

structural changes in the academic setting such as cooperative learning and college instruction. As a single mother, her primary concern is to maintain stability and security within her family structure. Sarah highly favors web-based distance learning from a well-recognized public university that fosters a positive and welcoming school climate. Examining self-reflection and self-insight towards her academic pursuit, Sarah identified personal strength determination (e.g., increased academic aspirations) and social resources (e.g., family/employer support) to promote degree completion. The primary motivating factors identified in her academic pursuit were family financial stability and generational familial enhancement.

Commonly desired by Sarah, adult learners are more likely to seek online instructional delivery services, specifically to accommodate those in need of educational credentials and enhancement into the workplace. Despite the increased usage of web-based course delivery, many students favor traditional learning environments in the university (Adams & Corbett, 2010). Thus, personal, academic, and social factors may determine non-traditional students' preference in learning methods. Another area of concern identified was availability of financial resources (e.g., financial aid, stipends, and scholarships). Non-traditional students with limited support may have an increased need for financial aid. Sarah expressed the desire for university and federal grants instead of loans due to her inability to pay back school debt. Receiving financial aid is related to higher retention rates (DesJardins & McCall, 2010). Students who receive financial aid may experience less financial hardships; have less risk of psychological distress and a lower likelihood of college drop out.

Lastly, non-traditional students may lack campus involvement and experience increased social marginalization. Individuals who are marginalized oftentimes experience social disconnection from the mainstream group (Cuyjet, 1994, as cited in Gossett, Cuyjet & Cockriel, 1998). Marginalized

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