Chapter 18
A Framework for Examining Data and Taking Action to Increase Student Retention and Graduation

Gita Wijesinghe Pitter
Florida A&M University, USA

William Hudson Jr.
Florida A&M University, USA

ABSTRACT

Increasing student retention and graduation is one of the most difficult challenges facing Traditionally Black College and University (TBCUs). This chapter examines the type of data that is generally available and useful to issues of retention, and suggests a variety of possible actions that can be undertaken to address the findings and impact retention and graduation rates. The framework of IR data and possible actions to address problems revealed by data is based on the experiences at Large State A&M University. The issues revealed are common to many TBCUs, and it is hoped that this sharing of information will assist other TBCUs in addressing the important issues of retention and graduation rates.

BACKGROUND

Large State A&M University is an 1890 land-grant institution and is the largest single-campus Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the country. In fall 2010 the student enrollment was 13,277. It is a doctoral research university that offers a wide range of academic programs including baccalaureate, master's, professional and doctoral degrees. In keeping with its historic mission, the University provides opportunities to many first generation college students.

SETTING THE STAGE

Large State A&M University, like many TBCUs and HBCUs, has historically provided opportunities to many students who may lack the academic preparation to be accepted to other institutions, but who demonstrate potential for success. While this has resulted in many students obtaining degrees who otherwise would not have, the practice brings with it the risk of relatively low retention and graduation rates. In order to increase its graduation rate, in 2009 the Large State A&M University established an office of University Retention. The University has had an Office of Institutional Research for many years. In 2008 the University established an Office of Institutional Effectiveness which included the Office of Institutional Research, the Office of Assessment, the Office of University Planning, the SACS Quality Enhancement Plan and the Office of Program Quality. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and the Office of University Retention have developed a close collaboration to utilize data in addressing the issue of retention and graduation rates.

CASE DESCRIPTION

A variety of data and information which could impact retention and graduation have been obtained from Institutional Research and reviewed collaboratively with the Office of University Retention. Below are descriptions of the types of data examined, issues revealed and actions initiated.

Data: Graduation Data by Type of Student

A study examined a cohort of students in depth, following them through six years after matriculation at the University. The analysis included the correlation between graduation rates and various factors including entrance test scores, high school GPA, special admission status, race, and gender.

Issues Revealed

The study revealed a number of issues that had implications for retention and graduation and led to further study and/or actions: (a) Students below a certain high school GPA had less than a 10% chance of graduating; (b) White and Asian students had lower graduation rates than African American Students; (c) Many students in good standing did not return to the institution; (d) the overall graduation rate has declined slightly in the past five years.

Actions Initiated

Each of the issues revealed, listed above, led to the following actions at the institution:

a. The recruitment and admissions offices were advised of the finding and suggested they set a higher minimum threshold for high school GPA in both recruitment and admissions. The Office of Retention is working closely with the Office of Recruitment to enroll students with better academic preparation. HBCUs pride themselves on giving an opportunity to students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to pursue higher education. However, this admirable intention must be tempered by data on what actually happens to many students below a certain threshold. If students have a 90% chance of dropping out, with significant student loan debt, and we do not have sufficient programs in place to help them overcome serious academic deficiencies from K-12, have we actually done the student a favor by admitting them?

b. For White and Asian students who left in good standing, examine further if they transferred out to other institutions and reasons for such transfer.

c. In relation to students in good standing who did not return, telephone surveys were conducted to determine the primary reasons. We

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