

**BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ENROLLMENT AND GRADUATION:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RETENTION PRACTICES
FOR NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
ATTENDING FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS**

Summary of Study and Findings

J. Lisa Stewart, Ph.D.

Introduction

- This study focuses on the problem of nontraditional student retention at faith-based institutions.
- When students enroll in college, the desire of the institution is for students to remain enrolled and graduate with their degree.
- By 2019, NCES (2009), “projects a 28% increase in enrollment among college students 25-34 years old and 22% increase among college students 35 years old and over” (p.20).
- While enrollment in higher education continues to increase, there is a gap between enrollment and graduation due to students failing to persist and graduate. (College Board, 2013; NCES, 1994; Seidman, 2005)
- There are many studies that focus on the topic of retention, including those offering reasons why students fail to persist. These studies include possible factors that impact student persistence, but most of these studies are related to traditional student retention. (Astin, 1985; Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1985)
- There are very few studies that explore effective retention practices, which are needed to assist nontraditional students in persisting to graduation. (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012)

Statement of the Problem

- Research indicates the attrition patterns between traditional students and nontraditional students are very different. (Drekmeier, 2010)
- According to Patricia Franz (2010), “Faith-based colleges and universities, much like their secular counterparts, have been challenged to coordinate not only the mechanisms to encourage persistence, but also assemble the administrators and faculty to execute upon the outlined tactics” (p. 4).
- With the increase among nontraditional students returning to college (Aslanian & Green-Giles, n.d.; NECS, 2009) institutions can no longer ignore their needs or incorrectly profile this population of students. (Aslanian & Green-Giles, n.d.)
- Even though there are research studies on retention at faith-based institutions, these studies addressed specific groups such as minorities, athletes (Latham, 2004 & Couch, 2011) and traditional students (Vander Schee, 2008).
- Still, little is known about effective retention practices used to retain nontraditional undergraduate students at faith-based schools. The problem is a gap in knowledge regarding retention practices used to manage retention within Christian higher education. (Vander Schee, 2008)
- Research is needed to explore and describe the retention practices of nontraditional undergraduate students, attending faith-based institutions, to add to the existing literature of higher education, fill the gap within Christian higher education, and provide institutions with helpful and effective practices that promote and encourage student persistence.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to explore, identify, and describe the nontraditional undergraduate student retention practices from the perspective of retention managers at ten faith-based institutions and to gain an understanding if the retention practices have impacted retention at their institution.

Methodology

Research Methodology and Design

- The research methodology selected for this qualitative study was a non-experimental exploratory phenomenology method, with a quantitative component. This type of research methodology is commonly used to explore and obtain an understanding of a specific problem (Creswell, 2009).
- In order to address the quantitative component of this study the research design selected was mixed methods, which focuses on specific methods of inquiry. (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011)
- The specific methods for this study focused on data collection, data analysis, and mixing the data in a single study.

Methodology

Sample

- The participants for this study were not chosen at random, but instead were purposely identified and selected.
- During a pre-screening phone call participants were chosen if they met the pre-determined criteria for the study, which included:
 1. Administrator and/or staff member who is responsible for managing retention at their institution
 2. Employed at a faith-based university or college in the United States
 3. Their institution must serve nontraditional undergraduate students
 4. The faith-based institutions are members of the Christian Adult Higher Education Association (CAHEA), which is national US organization
- Ten participants were selected for this study, as recommended by Creswell, for this type of study. (Creswell,1998)

Methodology

Data Collection

- Data for this research study was collected from the participants in this study who are responsible for managing retention at faith-based institutions in the United States.
- Phase one of the data collection process began with a prescreening phone call to clarify the purpose of the study, to confirm that the participant met the criteria, and to allow the participant to ask questions.
- Next, the participant was asked to complete an online survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire consisted primarily of closed-ended questions, making the instrument more quantitative, but also included a few open-ended questions for clarification or explanation.
- The second phase in the data collection process included a recorded phone interview using qualitative open-ended interview questions.

Methodology

Instrumentation Survey Questionnaire

The questionnaire instrument (Appendix G) was designed by Noel Levitz and used to collect national undergraduate student retention practices and college completion data annually. The survey consisted of five sections:

- **Section one** -collected information on the planning and leadership retention practices of the participant's institutions.
- **Section two** – asked participants to rate the effectiveness of student retention and completion practices for nontraditional students, including programs targeted to specific populations.
- **Section three** of the questionnaire obtained information on the effectiveness of programs for online learners.
- **Section four** – collected information on the effectiveness of internal operations practices for optimizing student retention and college completion and the graduation rate of the participant's institution.
- **Section five** - collected data on how participants determine the overall effectiveness of their retention and college completion practices.

Instrumentation Conversational Interview

- The second instrument used in this study consisted of qualitative interview questions.
- The researcher used the primary and sub-research questions in a conversational interview to:
 - explore more in depth details related to the participants' institutions retention practices,
 - explain and build upon the responses from the survey questionnaire, and
 - identify common themes among the participant responses.
- The researcher prepared a table to show the relationship between the survey and interview data and the research questions.

Methodology

Data Analysis

Online survey questionnaire

- Survey Monkey was used to administer the online survey questionnaire and the analyses feature provided by Survey Monkey to analyze individual response and code common responses. The following steps were utilized in analyzing the quantitative data:
 - Filtered survey data by individual responses and question summaries.
 - Coded survey responses in relation to the research questions.
 - Exported data to Excel computer software.
 - Used Excel to performed basic analysis to compute frequencies, percentages, proportions and drawings of charts and graphs.
 - The survey questions were aligned with the primary and sub-research questions to ascertain the data more efficiently, to perform a comparison among the participant responses, and to present the research findings.

Methodology

Data Analysis

Conversational Interview

The researcher analyzed the qualitative data using Creswell's qualitative inductive process of data analysis, in which the data is examined using a "bottom-up" approach (Creswell, 2005). The following steps were utilized in analyzing the qualitative data:

- Transcribe the interviews.
- Develop starter codes to organize and analyze narrative data. Starter codes are derived based on the literature review.
- Analyze the data for the emergence of conceptual categories and descriptive themes.
- Organize the survey and interview data according to the research questions.
- Create codes for emerging themes that come from the data. Use the coding scheme to break up the data and define the themes.
- Code the data using the coding scheme based on starter codes and emerging codes.
- Interpret the findings by dividing the coded data into themes.
- Clusters of themes were formed by grouping units of meaning together.

Results

Primary Research Question 1

What are the effective retention practices utilized to retain nontraditional undergraduate students attending ten faith-based institutions?

Findings

Each of the participants identified specific retention practices utilized to retain nontraditional students at their institution. They rated the effectiveness of the practices utilized ranging between very effective to somewhat effective. The retention practices identified as most effective include:

1. Advising
2. Learning communities
3. Early alert and student intervention
4. Academic support services
5. Orientation

Results

Primary Research Question 2

How have the retention practices of ten faith-based institutions impacted the persistence of students who receive their retention services?

Findings

- One participant responded their institution cohort graduation rate increased 5% to 9.9%
- Three participants responded their institutions cohort graduation rate increased 1% to 4.9%
- Four participants indicated their institutions cohort graduation rate remained stable within +/- 1%
- One participant responded their institution cohort graduation rate decreased 1% to 4.9%
- One participant indicated their institutions cohort graduation rate decreased 10% or more

Summary of Findings: Sub-Research Questions

- Most faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **do not offer** a first-year program, but are equipped with effective academic resources to support the first-year nontraditional undergraduate student (**sub-research question 1**)
- Most faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **do have** effective academic support services available to serve the nontraditional undergraduate student (**sub-research question 2**)
- Most faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **do not have** retention programs specifically targeting nontraditional undergraduate students entering with insufficient academic preparation, but utilize their existing academic support services to assist these needs as identified. (**sub-research question 3**)
- Most faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **do not offer** remedial or developmental courses for nontraditional undergraduate students, but will utilize existing academic support services or establish partnerships within the community to help the student receive the assistance needed. (**sub-research question 4**)
- All faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **offer** an orientation for new nontraditional undergraduate students either online, on ground, or in both delivery formats. Most all faith-based institutions utilize the orientation as a method to help engage the student. (**sub-research question 5**)
- Retention managers at faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **were able** to effectively describe from their perspective the relationship between the institution's Christian faith and retention. (**sub-research question 6**)
- All faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **offer some form** of tutoring services for nontraditional undergraduate students. (**sub-research question 7**)
- Most faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students **do not offer** a second-year program, but are equipped with effective academic resources to support the nontraditional undergraduate student during their second year (**sub-research question 8**)

Conclusions

- The findings of this study are important and informative, but far from conclusive. They are supported by literature, indicating that nontraditional student success in college involves successful programs and services provided by the institution. (Noel et al, 1985) **A highlight of the successful key findings includes:**
 - Most faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students do have effective academic support services available to serve the nontraditional undergraduate student.
 - All faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students offer an orientation for new nontraditional undergraduate students either online, on ground, or in both delivery formats.
 - Most all faith-based institutions utilize the orientation as a method to help engage the student.
 - Retention managers at faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students were able to effectively describe from their perspective the relationship between the institution's Christian faith and retention.
 - All faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students offer some form of tutoring services for nontraditional undergraduate students.
 - Most faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students do not offer a second-year program, but are equipped with effective academic resources to support the nontraditional undergraduate student during their second year.

Conclusions

- The overall findings did fulfil the purpose of this exploratory phenomenology research study, which was used to (1) explore and identify the retention practices for nontraditional students attending faith-based institutions (2) to describe the retention practices from the perspective of the retention managers, and (3) to gain an understanding if the retention practices have impacted retention at their institution.
- The explanatory sequential mixed method research design allowed for the integration of data collected from the interviews, which helped provide an explanation and build upon the quantitative data collected from the survey questionnaire, thus achieving the goal of maximizing the findings of this study.

In summarizing the overall findings:

When an institution has:

1) a written retention and college completion plan that includes measurable goals for retention and college completion rates, and measureable goals for improving retention rates from term to term, or year to year AND

2) a written plan with key metrics that allows them to measure persistence and progression results

The institution is better equipped to meet the needs of the students, and help them experience success. As a result, the institution will increase it's retention and completion rates, thus bridging the gap between enrollment and graduation!

Recommendations

- This study did not focus on the types of degree programs nontraditional students were enrolled in, this would be a recommendation for further research. The research could also measure the length of courses and its relationship to student persistence.
- The researcher gained further insight into the possible need for a more structured first-year program for nontraditional students as further examination of the data revealed that most of the participants' institutions utilized their current academic support services, but these services were not necessarily developed for "first-year" nontraditional students. Further research that focuses on the components needed for a first-year program, specifically for nontraditional students, would be helping with managing nontraditional student retention and persistence.
- Another recommendation could include replicating this study focused on retention practices for nontraditional graduate student retention and persistence.

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