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Reasons and Prevention of Freshman and Sophomore College Dropouts

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Three years ago, it was estimated that 60% of the job market requires a college education (Raley, 2007); as the economy continues to recover from the recent recession, that number is sure to increase. Yet in the United States, the average college continues to report a retention rate of only 56% (What works, 2010) for students proceeding from their freshman to sophomore years of college. Three most commonly cited reasons for dropping out are financial issues, not being academically prepared, or other social aspects (Lewis, 2011). While these reasons may seem valid to someone considering dropping out, with few exceptions, these reasons are addressable by colleges to minimize the impact on students and increase retention.

**Financial Issues**

For the DeVry campus in Irving, TX, the number one reason why freshman and sophomores withdraw from college is financial issues (Lewis, 2011). However, given the many financial aid options available to students, it should reason that in today’s era, with the importance of a college degree increasing, this should not be the case.

Financing is a large issue because students run into temporary problems, which end up being permanent because of how the situation was handled. The first problem is not planning far enough ahead (Whitbourne, 2002) which can leave the student more susceptible to financial difficulty down the road. Furthermore, many students lack an understanding of how financing affects the time required to complete a degree and how the degree will be financed. If a student does not understand the importance of long term planning, then a minor issue that was foreseeable could become a major situation, possibly causing the student to dropout.

A second problem is how tuition is processed when employer reimbursement is being relied upon (Flint, 2003). While freshman and sophomore college students are still widely stereotyped as recent high school graduates, this is no longer accurate as more adults are returning to college, comprising a larger percentage of the student population (Fincher, 2010). As adults return to college, some are returning with the support of their employer. Unfortunately, how most colleges expect payment and how many employers issue reimbursements are polar opposites. Most colleges expect tuition payment before the start of the term, yet most employers will not issue reimbursements until provided with proof of completion (Flint, 2003). While the college and the employer are looking out for their own interests, it can leave the adult student stuck with a financial issue.

The first problem can be reduced by increasing the information and planning assistance provided by advisors during the enrollment process. This information should be more than simply getting the student qualified and enrolled, but should also look at the students financial circumstances and plan for the entire degree. While it is not possible to plan for every situation, students should have a clear idea of how their degree will be financed from beginning to end.

To address the second issue, some colleges have begun implementing deferred payment programs to reduce the impact of tuition versus reimbursement (Flint, 2003); however, not all colleges are doing this. A process that might encourage more colleges to implement these programs is a contract between the college, employer, and student protecting the interests of all three. The college is assured that they will receive tuition payment from either the employer or the student; the employer maintains the ability to withhold payment until proof of passing is received; and the student maintains financial security of not juggling tuition and reimbursements, and added incentive to succeed because failure would default the tuition back to the student.

**Academically Prepared**

The next area of concern is that of students not being academically prepared to succeed in college. In 2010, the results from an America College Testing (ACT) survey were published and listed not being academically prepared as the number one factor in college dropout rates (What works, 2010). This is reinforced when one-third of adult students who enter college will dropout due to be not being academically prepared (Fincher, 2010). One cause is that not all colleges require students to take needed remedial courses. This results in students taking college level courses for which they are inadequately prepared, and failing (Fincher, 2010).

A student’s belief in their ability to learn also factors into this issue. A discussion with Rhonda Lewis (2010) reveals that some students enrolled in remedial courses do not succeed because they believe they are incapable of learning or re-learning the information, or do not feel that they are receiving adequate instruction.

While these areas complement each other, they should be dealt with individually. First, the academic bar needs to be raised on what is acceptable when enrolling in college courses. College admissions advisors should not discourage students from enrolling, but students need to understand that certain skills are required; otherwise, even freshmen level courses will be extremely difficult. Remedial classes help address this problem, but students need to understand that these courses are not a hindrance, but rather a means of achieving their goals. Students that need remedial classes should also feel that they are receiving adequate instruction and learning what should be learned, just as with any other college course. This means every remedial class needs to be taught as a regular class, or if a college combines multiple remedial courses into one general course, then a teacher or student aid should be available for each sub-section of the course. This would help to ensure that students receive comprehensive instruction in the needed subject.

Secondly, all courses need to be taught using methods that allow the students to comprehend the concepts of the course and realize that they are learning. According to Thomas Flint (2003) adult students tend to outperform traditional college students because the adult is learning the concepts rather than memorizing and reproducing facts. This difference likely stems from an adult student’s real world experience and understanding that reality does not follow a memorize and reproduce methodology. As such, engaging students through interactive or real world applications allows for better comprehension of what is being taught, increasing student success and retention.

**Social Issues**

The last major dropout issue is that of feeling socially accepted. This issue has been debated for many years. Both Yvonne Raley (2007) and Jonathan Whitbourne (2002) discuss students with multiple issues, including social issues, which lead to the students’ dropout.

Generally, social issues occur when a student has not properly researched a college before enrolling, which causes social problems because their personality does not match the college campus. Raley (2007), suggests that prospective students spend time researching colleges before deciding where to attend, and Whitbourne (2002) suggests that students should participate in campus activities, but what can colleges do to increase retention? Although most colleges have study groups and other activities scheduled and advertized, apparently, more needs to be done. In a 2009 survey, 68% of students in a community college reported that they never interacted with fellow students outside of class for class projects or assignments, and 84% reported never participating in study groups (Benchmarking & Benchmarks, 2009). These are unacceptably high statistics when social issues are one of the top reasons that students dropout.

Colleges have options that could improve these statistics. The first being course related study and social events throughout the semester. During the first weeks of the semester the course instructor and students could set dates when the class will meet off campus for a project, and then go do something fun afterwards. Those that participate instantly solve two potential issues, by working with their classmates and instructors outside of the college environment and discovering that they fit in through the socialization.

Colleges could also encourage social interaction by sending out emails at the beginning of each month covering upcoming social activities. Some students may not visit the areas where these notices are normally published, or may not pay attention to clutter filled notice boards in the hallways and classrooms, but email is something that most people check at least once a day. This would increase the number of students that are aware of social events, and allow for a larger participation.

**Conclusion**

College retention rates are a very serious issue that colleges across the nation are trying to improve. With smart thinking and implementation, there are ways to reduce these issues. By providing long-term, detailed financial planning during the enrollment process; and finding ways such as contracts between student, employer, and college to allow deferred tuition programs to be implemented, colleges can reduce the impact of financial issues.

Several things can be done to reduce academic issues. These include raising the academic bar, improving the structure of remedial courses to make them feel like a understandable and proper course; and making all courses interactive and applicable to the business world.

Course study and social events should be planned so that academic and social interaction outside the classroom has a larger positive impact on the social experience. Monthly email reminders should also be sent out about upcoming social events helping to reduce social issues.

By taking proactive steps, such as those listed above, colleges across the nation can improve their overall retention rates, and increase the number of students that successfully graduate. All it takes is asking, “What are the issues?” and “What can we do about it?”, and then doing it.

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