

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Monitoring Student (Dis)engagement: Retention Officers' Experiences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

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Abstract

Most first-year university students experience serious academic and adjustment challenges, which remain undetected until it is too late to provide meaningful intervention. Universities are therefore developing academic support systems that can assist in identifying students who experience learning challenges early on, and provide quality first-year experiences that ensure that first-year students adapt, engage and succeed at the university. Such student academic support systems should provide resources that detect risk factors as early as possible. This study explores the support provided by the Retention Officers (ROs) in assisting first-year students to overcome disengagement issues at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, South Africa. Modelled on Tronto's (2010) Theory of Ethics of Care, the design of the First-Year Experience project is underpinned by the value of inclusion and care for first-year students in higher education. This practitioner-based paper draws on the experiences of ROs in monitoring first-year students' disengagement in a science faculty at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Data extracted through interviews and written reports by ROs formed the basis for a qualitative interpretation of ROs' experiences dealing with first-year students' disengagement. This paper therefore highlights the importance of mediating between discipline-based support and generic psycho-social support through the involvement of ROs to enhance student engagement.

Keywords

first-year experience; student engagement; first-year student support; ethics of care; Retention Officers

Introduction

Universities globally are devising strategies to support first-year students to successfully navigate the university effortlessly (Tinto, 2006). First-year students often experience challenges in transitioning from high school to university. While some first-year students cope better with transition and hence perform better academically, others struggle and consequently fail and drop out (McMillan, 2014). Anecdotal accounts suggest that first-year students are often overwhelmed by the large quantity of information they receive in the

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first weeks of entering the university. This leads to a sense of confusion and information overload. Some students do not get accepted into their programme of choice and are forced to accept an offer into another programme and this also results in confusion and lack of commitment. Issues around student integration and responding to students' unpreparedness for university studies have been researched extensively with various models of coping with first-year student attrition proposed (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980; McInnis, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1993). Access for success and access for participation speak more to the South African higher education social justice agenda. In South Africa there is a high failure and dropout rate amongst first-year students, more especially African students, with a large number of first-generation students from disadvantaged socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Sader & Gabela, 2017). Consequently, there is a constant need to re-evaluate the efficacy of learning and social support being provided to first-year students. This paper explores the concept of Retention Officers (ROs) as one of the interventions being provided in order to enhance first-year students' engagement in the university. Specifically, the paper argues that the narratives of a small group of ROs accounting for how they experience first-year students' engagements with studies highlight how the ethics of care framework could be instrumental in extending the way first-year student learning support is being provided, especially for disadvantaged students.

The First-Year Experience (FYE)

This study emerges from the First-Year Experience (FYE) project in a university of technology in South Africa. The ROs' initiative is located within the FYE project in that university. FYE aims not only to increase student success and reduce attrition, but to maximise student achievement. FYE focuses on encouraging students to become fully inducted into their academic disciplines and programmes, providing them with psychosocial and academic support that will inspire them to achieve academic excellence. The university prioritises student support for first-year students with the aim of curbing attrition and increasing retention.

In order to curb attrition the university set up two FYE structures, one Institutional and the other Faculty-based. The Institutional FYE structure comprises of representatives from the Faculties and Support Units which include the Library, Student Counselling Unit, Disability Unit, and the Centre for Innovative Education Development and Student Welfare. The Institutional FYE Committee discusses issues pertaining to first-year students in all six faculties of the university. The FYE faculty structure comprises of the Teaching and Learning Coordinator, First-Year Coordinators, Retention Officers, Mentors, Tutors and Class Representatives. In the Faculty FYE structure discussions include: challenges, opportunities, sharing of best practices and general issues affecting first-year students. The creation of these structures encouraged the integration of the FYE in all the university structures.

Retention Officers (ROs) Initiative

Until recently, at the university there was no clear platform directed towards coordinating the socio-academic needs of first-year students within faculties and departments. FYE provided the platform and the Retention Officers' (ROs') initiative fell under its auspices. There are different names for ROs. They are called First Year Advisors (Box, Callan, Geddes, Kemp & Wojcieszek, 2012), Academic Advisors (Coll & Draves, 2009), Coaches (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). By whatever name they are called, they are responsible for academic preparation, information gathering, information sharing and social integration of first-year students into the university. They assist in preparing students academically for their chosen field of study, counsel students, provide advice and care, identify challenges students face and refer them to the relevant student support services. Retention Officers, Students Advisors and Coaches enhance the interaction between the students and the faculty and contribute to the development of positive attitudes, relationships and university experience in general (Coll & Draves, 2009).

The Retention Officers (ROs) initiative was established to track first-year students' performance and identify students' disengagement as well as who could be at risk as early as the first month of registration, and to provide care and support and/or refer them to the relevant support units. There is support for first-year students at the university such as the Writing Centre, Student Counselling, Disability Unit, Library, HIV/AIDS Unit and Student Welfare but they are located outside the faculties and first-generation students often do not know how to access such assistance. The ROs are senior students (Masters and PhD) employed in a faculty to provide support to first-year students. They work closely with the First-Year Coordinator in identifying risk factors faced by first-year students as early as possible and are paid a monthly stipend. The ROs undergo training in basic counselling skills, understanding students with disabilities, accessing Blackboard, basic understanding of HIV/AIDS, and mentoring and understanding social issues that impact academic performance. Training of ROs is done in collaboration with other support units at the university and focuses on the student in totality which is key to first-year transition (Tinto, 2006). This is confirmed by Cleyle and Philpott (2012) whose study proposes that institutional structures at the university could be instrumental in student engagement and success. Universities should therefore invest in support services in preparing students for higher education.

The ROs' role is to ensure that first-year students understand how things work at the university, which includes how they are being supported and whether they know where and how to access academic and other support services. Bettinger and Baker (2014, p. 5) assert that first-generation students are often not aware that they require assistance, do not take steps towards seeking help and do not know what questions to ask. In addition, the ROs are responsible for monitoring class attendance, non-submission of assignments, failing of tests and academic literacy issues. This involves contacting students who have missed classes, failed a test, and could not submit an assignment, to find out what their problem

was, and assisting them in getting the necessary help and/or referring them to the relevant support units available. Such support follows a compassionate and holistic approach that acknowledges the reality of first-year experience (Box et al., 2012, p. 93; Kift, 2015).

Student Transition and Student Engagement: A Brief Overview

The RO initiative is aimed at student success at universities and in so doing it follows Morrow's (1993) concept of epistemological access. Epistemological access does not only denote registering students at the university and permitting them to study but signifies knowledge of the course they are studying (Morrow, 1993). In order for the students to be engaged in their studies, they need to be provided with support. The role of an RO is to provide such support. Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013) attest to high attrition rate at first-year level in South African higher education institutions. CHE (2013) further confirmed a 33% dropout rate of students accessing universities. Several causes have been alluded to for the high attrition rates that include but are not limited to transitional challenges, inability to cope with the complex curricula, lack of support at the university, financial problems and incorrect choice of course of study. Lack of support is the reason why the University of Technology in this study instituted the Retention Officers' initiative within the First-Year Experience project.

Tinto (1975) proposes that when students are provided with support they are more likely to be satisfied, to persist and not drop out of the university. Disengaged students are less likely to be committed to the university, will not be satisfied with the institution and hence drop out (Nelson et al., 2012). Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980) acknowledge that the more students are integrated into the university the more they are committed to the university. Tinto (1987, p. 176) further asserts that:

Students are more likely to become committed to the institution and, therefore stay, when they come to understand that the institution is committed to them. Programs cannot replace the absence of high quality caring and concerned faculty and staff.

First-year students expect such care to come from staff at the institution. Research has affirmed the positive influence that staff can have in promoting student transition (Tinto, 1987). Student–staff relations also promote student learning and development, thereby enhancing student experience at the university.

Tronto (2010, p. 162) asserts that care relationships should have clear, defined and acceptable purposes. In the case of the ROs, the overall purpose is retention and they have a clear mandate of supporting the first-year students so that they can adapt, engage and succeed at the university. Tronto (2010, p. 160) further identified four phases of care: caring about, caring for, giving care and receiving care. Caring about refers to being attentive to the needs of the person being cared about and also picking up unspoken needs; caring for is making a conscious decision to meet the needs recognised and putting together resources to meet these needs; giving care refers to the actual act meeting the caring needs; and receiving care involves the reaction of the person receiving care. In the context of South African higher education, the high attrition rate of students entering

university (CHE, 2013) makes the first-year student vulnerable and therefore requiring care. The ROs' interaction with their relationship with the students exposes them to be able to provide care. Kuh (2009) stresses the importance of student experience during their studies at the university.

Student Engagement

Zepke (2013) looks at student engagement in the university in terms of engagement with lecturers, peers and support provided by the university. Studies indicate that student-staff interaction play an important role in student engagement and success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Trowler (2010) and Strydom, Basson and Mentz (2010) recognise the incorporation of academic and non-academic aspects of the student experience in order to improve engagement. Kuh (2009) and Cleyle and Philpott (2012) recommend that in order for student engagement to succeed it should include appropriate support structures that cater for students' needs. Such support structures could be beneficial in student engagement and success. The RO initiative is one such structure that serves the students' needs to ensure that they engage with their studies. Thomas (2002) acknowledges the connection between student engagement and success.

Research Design

This research focuses on ROs' experiences of first-year students' learning engagements. As such, much of the data needed leans towards ROs' perceptions and accounts of first-year students' learning engagements. In order to ensure that this is not a superficial description of the students' experiences, the study was designed within the qualitative design. Qualitative data was collected from eight ROs from different departments in a science faculty at a university of technology in South Africa from February to September. The participants were purposely selected so as to create a good rapport between research focus and the participants (Brynman, 2008). Purposive selection accentuates rich information from the participants (Patton, 2002) and allows for deeper understanding of student engagement and their challenges. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were held with the eight participants who were part of the ROs initiative. This was supplemented by observations extracted from ROs' reports. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data provided insight into the care provided by the ROs and the challenges faced by first-year students. The following research questions guided the data extraction process:

- What are the challenges faced by first-year students in your department?
- What kind of support does the first-year student require in order to engage?
- What kind of support does the RO provide?

Findings

Based on the information extracted from interviews and ROs' reports, the following key aspects stand out regarding how first-year students engage with learning in particular and university life in general.

Late coming and class attendance

Some students arrive late or do not attend classes (especially the early morning classes) because of the unreliability of the transport system in the city.

“I miss classes because in a week, the trains are delayed 3 or 4 times and we only get the information about the delay after waiting for an hour for the train.”

Unreliable commuter trains are a key problem that students from economically disadvantaged suburbs face. This greatly hampers their ability to arrive on campus on time or at all as they often cannot afford alternative modes of transport such as buses and taxis. One student reported staying about 50km away from the university. There is only one train that leaves from that area at 5.00 am and, if he misses that train, the next one will only arrive five hours later.

“If I miss the 5am train I go back home.”

Another student reported being just lazy and finding it difficult to wake up in time:

“I am not a morning person. I wish classes can start at 11h00.”

Clubbing was fingered as another cause for late coming or non-attendance of classes:

“When I go to Long Street on a week day it is difficult to come to school the next day.”

In order to support the student who lives 50km away from campus, the concerned RO organised a space in the hostel for the student. Another RO had a discussion with the lazy student and the one who goes clubbing on week days, and showed them the importance of attending classes and arriving on time for classes as this will not only help them at the university but also in the workplace as the university is preparing them for the world of work. The RO went as far as finding students staying in the same area so that they could travel together to avoid being robbed on the way to the bus or train station. A WhatsApp group that included all the students was formed so that those who had challenges with public transport could inform the group of their late coming or non-attendance. The RO would inform the lecturer, request the work to be done and then send it to the students. Workshops on time management and goal setting were arranged for the students so that they could understand the importance of planning their school work, setting time aside daily for studying and setting themselves SMART goals. The RO also reported that in some classes, taking the attendance register was problematic, especially in large classes.

Non-submission of assignments and poor test results

Some students reported that they had not yet grasped the teaching style of the lecturer and therefore failed to follow in class.

“At school our teachers used to explain other stuff in isiXhosa but here the lecturers speak English all the time and I get lost most of the time.”

Others struggled with academic writing conventions when completing their assignments even though these students were referred to the Writing Centre to acquire the necessary writing skills.

"I submitted an assignment that did not have references because I did not know that I needed to write references."

The RO referred the student to the Writing Centre for Harvard Referencing workshops in this case. The Writing Centre also supported the student with workshops on topics such as note-taking and academic writing skills. The RO used the WhatsApp group to remind students about upcoming assignments and tests so that they could prepare on time and submit assignments to the Writing Centre for writing support.

Lack of resources

Some indicated that they lacked resources such as computers and learning space at home.

"I do not own a laptop and there is no computer at home so I struggle when I have to write an assignment and the computer labs are always full."

"At home we are nine and we share one room and I do not even have a space to study. I must wait for everyone to sleep and study in the kitchen."

Though there is a 24-hour computer laboratory at the university, students who are not staying in hostels cannot stay at the university until very late when working on their assignments because they have to catch public transport to get home.

"I have a bus ticket and have to catch a 17h00 bus. I cannot stay in the computer lab until late."

Others do not have a space to study at home as the whole family stay in a one-roomed shack. In response to the above-mentioned issue the RO requested the students to form study groups to meet over weekends or students to come individually to study at the university or a nearby library.

Personal issues

Some of the issues that the students mentioned to the ROs can be considered to be personal and sensitive. For example, two students shared the following information with the ROs:

"I am pregnant and I am scared to tell my parents and I don't know what to do. I am stressed out."

"I am not sure whether to drop out with my studies or not, I have been diagnosed with a dreaded disease. What is a point of studying if I am going to die in any case?"

The RO arranged counselling for these students for professional advice.

Financial issues

South Africa is a very unequal country with huge disparities between the rich and the poor. Therefore, finance will always influence poor students' levels of engagement at the university. Some students lack basic needs such as daily provision of food. This is what one student reported to the RO:

"My mother who is a bread winner has been retrenched and now we are experiencing difficulties at home, most days we do not have food and just drink water and sleep."

The RO brought these issues for the attention of the head of department who in turn asked for donations in terms of foodstuffs from lecturers. Some students have to fend for their families while they are studying. Another student also reported that:

“I work at a restaurant 4 nights a week so that my family and I can survive.”

The student was offered a job as a student assistant, even though it does not pay much, but the student could at least attend classes and was no longer tired. Both these issues will affect the engagement of these students.

Other issues

Some issues are explained during orientation and are written in the subject guide but first-year students could not grasp them very well and ended up seeking answers from the ROs.

“I was sick when a test was written, I have a sick certificate, and to whom do I submit the sick certificate?”

“Where is room 314 in this building?”

“How do I get my lecturer if I want to ask something?”

These questions might seem trivial and something that students can find out for themselves, but they are significant in gauging student engagement. The ROs encouraged students to approach them whenever they have questions and even if they think the questions are stupid.

The majority of students received the care provided by the ROs very well. They did not wait for the RO to approach them, but approached the RO on their own when they experienced challenges.

“I was approached by a group of five who were struggling with calculations, looking for a tutor.”

Not all students were happy with the care given by the ROs. One student complained that the RO is always in their face and “must give him a break!”.

Challenges faced by ROs

ROs also face challenges as mentioned by these ROs:

“The previous year we were more successful in referring students with problems to support units, the short term this year made such intervention impossible.”

Monitoring attendance register is sometimes problematic because of large classes.

Discussion

Universities globally have become more diverse due to increased numbers of student registrations. Diversity is evident in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, race and socioeconomic status. Universities are therefore compelled to review their retention strategies in order to accommodate and retain the diverse students coming into the university (Coll & Draves, 2009). Universities made use of academic advising as a way of increasing retention (Tinto, 2006). The RO initiative in the context of the university under study provides an early

warning system and feedback that is critical to student engagement. The ROs provide a caring space for first-year students to talk openly about their issues without fear of being judged. The students felt that someone cared for them and about them. They, in turn, received the care and engaged with their studies. Knowing that somebody cares for them encouraged students to persevere. This is confirmed by the following statement: "Young people need emotional, spiritual and communal support before they start learning (Jansen, 2015).

Monitoring of first-year student engagement and intervening with students who are at risk of failing can help curb the high attrition and dropout rates at higher education institutions (Box et al., 2012). The majority of first-year students entering higher education are first-generation students who lack cultural capital that can assist them in navigating higher education (Pather & Chetty, 2015; Norodien-Fataar & Daniels, 2016).

The onus is on students to seek and utilise the support that is being provided by the ROs. Receiving support and making use of the available resources at their disposal at first-year level lays a foundation for successful learning in their future years of study. Students need to make a conscious decision to engage with their books on a regular basis. In order for the students to be able to do this, they need somebody caring for and about them. While students commit to their learning, staff at university should show care and enhance the commitment the students show.

Some of the students have limited resources that are detrimental to their engagement. Not possessing a personal computer and not having access to the internet disadvantages the 21st century student. Technology plays a very important role in terms of accessing information and the actual writing of assignments. However, some lecturers are oblivious of students' circumstances and demand a lot from the students while Paulsen and St. John (2002) caution that it is important to take these circumstances into consideration. The ROs, by engaging with the students, bring these issues into the open so that they can be discussed and solutions found.

The majority of first-generation students come from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds where there is a lack of basic needs for survival such as food and study space. Hunger and poverty are prevalent in South Africa. ROs can create awareness about these issues and bring them out for discussion so that the university can devise ways of resolving them.

Conclusion

Retention Officers play an important role in providing material and interpersonal resources to first-year students, such as access to information and services. This study adds to the already considerable volume of research on supporting first-year student learning engagement in South Africa. However, the paper extends the argument on how first-year student learning initiatives are conceptualised and implemented from an ethics of care perspective. This is a practitioner based paper reflecting on ROs' accounts and experiences of first-year student engagement. In this regard, the paper argues that a caring RO, just like any other student learning support personnel, can make significant changes

in how first-year students engage with their academic work. Therefore, even though the RO initiative adds to the already considerable number of student support initiatives in the higher education landscape, the most important contribution of the RO initiative is how the ROs use their past experiences as students, and a caring approach in listening to students' challenges, thereby enabling these students to re-engage with their studies. When students felt overwhelmed and alienated by the university they had a person in the form of the ROs to talk to and offload their baggage. The ROs were a convenience for first-year students to ask small questions, some of which they felt embarrassed to ask, and these questions were vital to students' adaptation, engagement and success – especially for first-generation students. ROs, through their continuous contact with students, collected data on student engagement that can be utilised to enhance institutional efficiency and inspire recurring quality improvement. Sometimes the ROs could not do their work well because of large classes and the limited time they have, especially during student protests. Some lecturers are reluctant to allow the ROs to access first-year students' information though the ROs are sworn to maintaining of confidentiality in the contracts they sign.

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