

Expanding Expectations: Faculty Perceptions on Student Retention

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Abstract

The shift in the political environment calling for greater student retention in higher education is changing the work dynamics of higher education faculty. Despite many initiatives, the research indicates that faculty have the greatest impact on student persistence. The demands for faculty time continues to increase and to broaden. No longer do faculty just teach courses, engage in research, and perform some service; today many faculty are also expected to help in student retention. This descriptive survey looks at faculty perceptions of their roles in retention efforts and the impacts on faculty expectations. Results show a general trend of faculty having increasing responsibilities for student success. Particularly, the expectations of faculty have shifted more towards having faculty provide mentoring and building more personal relationships with students.

Keywords: student retention, faculty responsibilities, faculty roles

The roles and responsibilities of university faculty have changed over the years. Faculty made changes and adapted at the end of wars (Nelson & Wright, 1992), in response to political pressures (Chan & Luk, 2013), because of disease and pandemics such as COVID-19 (Liu et al., 2022) and, currently, to the pressures of retaining students (Houser et al., 2020). The ways in which faculty work with students have undergone drastic changes as well. Faculty play an important role in student success (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Lahir et al., 2021). Being a university professor or instructor today requires a skill set and willingness to provide whatever help students need in order to be successful as students (Ortagus et al., 2021). In the

twenty-first century the role of university faculty has become more than one who is just an expert in a field of study who imparts knowledge.

Expanding Teaching Roles

Traditionally higher education faculty were tasked with providing adults information about a specific discipline through lecture. Lecture has long been an accepted style of teaching at institutions of higher education (Friesen, 2014). It was expected that university faculty were the fount of knowledge and had the responsibility of instilling their knowledge to students (Jones, 2007).

Over time as university enrollment grew, so did the responsibilities of faculty to teach and retain students. Universities have seen an unprecedented increase in enrollment in their undergraduate programs over the past 20 years (Husar et al., 2020). Trow (1973) identified problems inherent in the growth of higher education. They argued that as university enrollment increases, the quality of education decreases. This decrease is due in part to faculty not having enough time to meet the needs of the students as they prepare, teach, and assess lesson content while doing research and service, and in part to the shift in the student body being less prepared for the rigors of higher education (Trow, 1973).

Today's faculty have been asked to engage in activities not historically associated with university coursework, including taking attendance, reminding students that coursework is overdue, and providing mid-semester grade feedback (Millea et al., 2018) in efforts to improve student retention rates. Faculty are increasingly assessing student pass rates, making changes to instruction to improve student outcomes (Hylton et al., 2016; Montenery et al., 2013; Purchase & Simmons, 2017; Skinner et al., 2017), and spending more time and effort helping students succeed in their academic work (Houser et al., 2020). Such assistance measures require additional faculty responsibilities and more time and effort than traditional teaching. These extra responsibilities can impact faculty perceptions of these student outcomes-based initiatives (Pattel, 2014). The initiatives of universities to retain and help more students succeed can be likened to that of a helicopter hovering above the student on the ready to swoop in and provide assistance at the first sign of academic distress (Kittle & Gallagher, 2020; Miller & Mills, 2019).

Parents who are overly involved in their children's lives, both financially and emotionally, are often referred to as helicopter parents (Cline & Fay, 1990). Recent college admissions scandals (Bosman et al., 2019; Jaschik, 2019) exemplify this helicopter parenting phenomenon in the extreme. Students who have grown up with helicopter parents may lack the skills to navigate life independently. One study found that these students perceived their basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence had been undermined by the well-meaning practices of helicopter parents (Schiffrin et al., 2014). These students often feel entitled and believe they deserve special treatment by their professors (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Schiffrin & Liss, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). In relation to success and persistence in college, these

students often lack self-regulation skills resulting in procrastination, lack of initiative, and low motivation to succeed. Darlow et al., (2017) found high rates of low academic persistence in students who had helicopter parents. Students raised by helicopter parents are more likely to suffer from higher levels of depression and anxiety, and thus more at risk of school burnout (Love et al., 2020; Schiffrin et al., 2014). Despite students reporting not liking being helicoptered, McAllum (2016) found that students want to “simply replace helicopter parents with helicopter professors” (p. 364).

Universities have tried to counteract the problem of changing faculty roles and student retention by providing faculty with development in instructional methods and student advisement (Austin & Sorinelli, 2013). However, these training opportunities may be seen as extra responsibilities by faculty.

The COVID-19 pandemic required many faculty to engage in rapid changes in instructional modality (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Prior to this, even though there was an increased demand for online and distance education, faculty resisted adopting online and distance education (Gratz & Looney, 2020). Now that faculty have shown a capability to move to online and distance formats, many are predicting that this will be an expectation of today’s faculty (Guppy et al., 2022). With varied course delivery methods (face-to-face, online asynchronous and synchronous, zoom, etc.), the search for the best ways of teaching for maximum success continues (Ward, 2020). This new emphasis forces faculty to be knowledgeable and skilled in best practices in varied modalities (Galvis & Caravajal, 2022) and, once again, places additional demands on faculty.

Adding Advising Roles

As early as the 1960s some universities began utilizing faculty as student advisors (Crookston, 1994). Lahir et al. (2021) and emphasized the continued importance of faculty to provide mentoring and advising to help students be successful academically, professionally, and emotionally. Crookston (1994) suggested that teaching is any experience where the teacher and student interact for overall growth. Thus, advising can be considered a form of teaching. Additionally, Crookston promoted the notion that the best advising is done through a developmental lens where the interaction between faculty and students is collaborative and discussion based versus prescriptive where the faculty mainly talks to the student. This type of advising requires time and emotional effort on part of the faculty.

While faculty advising helps students, Snyder-Duch (2018) cautioned to consider the emotional toll advising places on faculty. Constanti and Gibbs (2004) described advising as being an emotional labor. It is not uncommon for faculty to feel overwhelmed or stressed in their jobs (Berebitsky & Ellis, 2018; Richards et al., 2022). Student advising is just one more item that faculty have as a job expectation that can add to their stress.

Focusing on Retention

While advising can be a stress for faculty, retention can be a stress for universities. Tuition, a primary funding source for universities, is tied to student enrollment, time to graduation, and retention. In 1970 the number of individuals enrolled in higher education in the United States was 6.3 million; this number has more than doubled in the past 50 years with institutions of higher education serving 15.9 million students in 2020, almost 77% of whom attend public institutions. This increase in enrollment included a change in student demographics (Statista, 2021). For example, Statista (2021) reported that since 2017 the number of non-traditional students, those over the age of 22, who do not live on campus, or who work full-time or have family responsibilities has increased by eight percent. There are more first-generation college students than ever before. The population of Black students increased from 31% to 36%. The number of Hispanic students grew from 22 % to 36 % and the number of Asian students, from 56% to 65%. In addition, students with disabilities attending higher education now make up 11.1% of all university students. As of 2019, females make up 55% of all university students (Statista, 2021). This increasingly diverse demographic may increase the range of support needed for student success.

Many students are taking extended amounts of time to graduate. Some states, such as Utah, base university funding on six-year graduation rates (Education Task Force, 2013). The retention rate for dropping out of university is greatest during the first year of attendance then sharply drops until year five (Berzenksi, 2019). The longer students attend university, the more money the degree will cost, often resulting in high levels of student debt (Chakrabarti et al., 2020). Public perceptions of increased student debt and low retention rates influence legislative willingness to allocate public funding for universities.

Government support of these public institutions has shifted from fully funded to partially funded, to what an increasing number of institutions are currently experiencing, performance-based funding (Wise, 2021). In an effort to pressure universities to combat drop-out rates and increase student retention, funding is now based on performance criteria such as student enrollment, graduation rates, and job placement rates (Li et al., 2018; Ortagus et al., 2020; Ortagus et al., 2021; Rosinger et al., 2020). Such initiatives attempt to incentivize universities to increase student retention and graduation rates (Li et al., 2018).

Previously universities received public funding based on student enrollment and instructional costs. Beginning in Tennessee in 1979, performance-based funding was adopted and by 2014 there were 26 states utilizing performance-based funding (Dougherty et al., 2014). As defined by Dougherty and colleagues, “Performance funding connects state appropriations directly to a college’s performance on outcomes such as student retention, graduation, transfer, and job placement” (p. 164). A review of universities currently using performance funding indicates that these financing policies do affect institutional policies, and university demands on faculty (Dougherty et al., 2014).

Performance funding has influenced institutions' increased use of data to inform their academic and student service policies in an attempt to improve student outcomes (Dougherty et al., 2016). Data collection and reporting are often done by faculty. In addition, institutions under performance-based funding initiatives have created programs to assist in student success, including creating student success courses and centers, creating first-year programs for students, and adding electronic advising systems. Many of these programs and centers are facilitated by faculty (Dougherty et al., 2014).

The changing and expanding roles of faculty in response to policies and pressures to improve student retention and outcomes have brought about new demands on faculty. To better address the problem of understanding the current climate of retention efforts at the faculty level, this preliminary research examines the following three questions:

1. What are the elements of retention plans at the institution?
2. What retention roles are faculty being asked to perform?
3. What are faculty perceptions of their roles in retention efforts?

Methods

The study method utilizes a descriptive design with an Edisonian approach. Descriptive designs are particularly useful when the topic is developing and the characteristics are not yet understood (McCombes, 2021). The study design allowed for independent description of what currently exists without predetermined inclinations. An Edisonian approach allows the team to quickly identify and target relevant influences using information as it is received in conjunction with current practice (Sromovasan et al., 2013). Given the short timeframe for research and the exploratory nature of the study, convenience sampling was selected for the research in accordance with the Edisonian approach and its advantage in quickly obtaining preliminary data to determine if a trend existed or warranted further exploration (Saumure & Given, 2008).

Participants

The target population is higher education faculty. Surveys were initially sent to eight faculty at eight different institutions using convenience sampling. These eight faculty members were invited to participate and share the survey with other faculty. The snowball sample (Goodman, 1961) included 13 faculty at four- and two-year institutions across the United States. Participants self-identified their positions as full (seven participants), associate (three participants), or assistant professors, clinical faculty or instructor (one participant each) at small institutions of less than 5,000 students (five participants), medium institutions with up to 10,000 students (two participants) or large institutions over 15,000 students (five participants). Two participants taught at private institutions and ten taught at public institutions. One participant did not identify size or type of institution.

Instrument

The online survey consisted of three demographic questions and three open-ended questions, created by the research team, developed in the online platform Qualtrics, and reviewed by faculty at our institution. Faculty recommended brevity but no other changes. The survey was intentionally brief to target the specific topic and to minimize participant time to take the survey. Demographic survey questions included faculty position, institution type, and retention plan existence. Open-ended questions concerned the content, experiences, and perception of institutional retention plans.

Procedures

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, survey invitations were emailed to faculty. The study followed all IRB and university required ethical procedures, including informed voluntary consent, and confidentiality. Data management, including collection, storage, and confidentiality were managed in Qualtrics.

Analysis

Over a two-week period, 13 complete responses were logged for analysis. The survey included both quantifiable and subjective questions; therefore, a convergent data analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data was utilized to simultaneously compare the responses. The demographic responses were recorded in Qualtrics and subsequently verified by three members of the research team using tally counts. The open-ended questions were also recorded in Qualtrics and then read independently by two researchers. First, all the responses in the open ended questions were read independently. Then, a second independent reading of the responses was performed to identify general topics. Individual responses were subsequently categorized according to the identified topics and lastly the two researchers compared topic categories and responses assigned to those topics.

Results and Discussion

Student retention plans are increasingly becoming an integral part of higher education to improve student persistence in response to the diversification of changing student demographics (Husar et al., 2020). Retention efforts at the university level have become a primary focus due to changing retention as a result of student demographic trends, time to graduation timelines (Berzenski, 2019), and funding pressures (Dougherty et al., 2016). This study suggests that many institutions of higher education in the current data set have developed or are developing programs and policies to increase student retention or persistence.

Retention Elements

The first research question asks about the elements of student retention efforts in higher education institutions, by asking, “What student retention initiative(s), if any, is/are your institution considering, currently implementing, or talking about?” All but one of the participants (92%) responded that their institutions have either implemented a plan or are in the process of creating a plan to address student

retention. Regarding the elements or contents of retention plans, nine (82%) of the 11 participants with institutional plans specifically mentioned advising or mentoring students who are struggling. The following are representative comments from faculty when talking about their institution's retention initiatives. One participant wrote, "mentoring, first year experience courses required, advising..." Another wrote, "First year seminars, student success teams, affinity groups, advising, mentoring, meaningful relationship building." Note the focus is not on course quality, relevant academic programs, or research and grants but instead on the individual student.

Not only is the focus on advising and helping students as they start their university experience, but seven faculty mentioned the existence of early warning or tracking systems to identify students at risk. "We also identify student [sic] that are at risk for failing with an early warning and a dean follows up with those students." "... implemented early warning systems for students who are struggling." "...early alerts to academics for students who are failing classes to get them tutoring help...." Approximately half of the plans included a specific course or seminar targeting freshman or struggling students. "We implemented a freshman learning community where students take two courses...." Other strategies that were mentioned to increase student retention include: establishing learning communities, providing tutoring, requiring attendance during the first three weeks of the semester, learning student names, and posting mid-term grades and offering student success classes. It appears that to a certain degree, all of the institutions have increased their focus on students' needs as a critical element of their retention plan. This quote from the survey captures the new zeitgeist in higher education. "We call it 'student success' and have recently amped up our efforts-new administrative positions, new data-tracking, analytic, and advisement tools. It's all very new, but strong priority."

Interestingly, although the first research question asks about institution retention initiatives, several of the respondents' answers were about the individual efforts faculty were doing to help retain students. These responses follow the results of (Millea et al., 2018), where faculty provide individual mentoring and building more personal relationships with their students. The institutions in this study have retention programs in place, but the faculty in this study feel like their personal efforts are making more of an impact on student retention than any of the university initiatives in place.

Retention Roles

The second research question attempted to identify what roles, either officially or unofficially, faculty felt they were being asked to perform as a result of the renewed focus on retention. Participants responded to this question: "Please describe your experiences in implementing student retention." Half of the respondents indicated that they were making greater efforts to help students succeed in their role as faculty. "I work closely with students to help them resolve conflicts, create and implement plans for completing incompletes, and provide individual support and encouragement." Several participants

mentioned they serve as an official advisor and several others responded that their roles include both faculty and advisor. “I have served as a freshman seminar professor, advisor, and mentor for students interested in education.” “Each year I have been able to work directly with our OASIS department on retention of students.” Three respondents mentioned they currently serve on institution wide councils related to retention. “I serve as a Faculty Liaison to the Office of Academic Advising.” Most participants when describing experiences in implementing student retention efforts focused on developing personal relationships with individual students and not institutional elements of the retention plan. “I work to develop deep relationships and help students design and implement plans to help them succeed.”

Although colleges and universities are creating various programs to address student retention issues, the participants in this study identified the importance of faculty building relationships with students as the key factor in retaining students. Participants felt that the policies and practices mandated and or adopted by their institution do not have as significant of an impact on student retention as the personal relationships they themselves build with students. Ortagus et al., (2021) have written about the need for faculty to possess skill sets to help students and this study emphasizes the critical importance of this skill set for faculty.

Faculty Perception of Retention Roles

The third research question explores faculty’s perceptions of their possible roles in student retention. Participants consistently mentioned that faculty play an “essential” and “critical” role in student retention. “Faculty are indispensable partners - no tool or admin system is on the front lines like we are.” The overall responses of all but one participant can be best summarized by this statement:

For over a decade, I have been conducting research on barriers affecting college students with disabilities and those who are struggling and found that FACULTY is the #1 predictor for student return, retention, and graduation, above and beyond all other factors, including systemic infrastructure, counseling center, access center, academic success center, scholarship, alcohol, work-study program, on-campus housing, and types of disabilities.

In that same vein, results from the third survey question reveal that faculty feel they are the critical players in the retention process and that institutional programs can support their efforts but not supplant them. Such faculty relationships may be needed to help students learn critical skills such as self-efficacy or self-regulation that they did not learn prior to attending university (Schiffrin et al., 2014).

While writing this article, the authors of this paper experienced this same push from administration to reach out to students to improve the retention rates. An email from the Provost stated, “we are doing a better job of keeping the students that we already have, which is essential for student success. This does not just happen and I greatly appreciate your efforts to ensure student success through one on one connections with students both in and out of the classroom.” We know that students who have at least one faculty or

staff member they are connected to have a greater sense of belonging and are more likely to persist (Lahir et al. (2021).

Several faculty members mentioned the need for training and support to better fill this role, “There is a need for more training and conversation with faculty regarding their role in helping a student to remain on campus.” One faculty mentioned their frustration with the push to involve faculty in retention efforts, “I don’t think faculty can or should be involved in retention. It’s a different skill set. Unless you love this work and truly want to form these relationships, the role is hollow and it can push students out.”

Limitations and Conclusions

A limitation of the study include small sample size. While a small sample size can compromise generalization or extrapolation (Faber & Fonseca, 2014) the sample size in the current study allowed for a targeted examination of each response following the Edisonian approach (Sromovasan et al., 2013).

Two participants mentioned that although they were committed to student retention, they knew many other faculty at the university who were not. “Personally, I am highly involved and committed. However, I think I am in the minority. Many faculty feel like the initiatives are more centered around cutting costs than supporting students...” One participant was quite negative about student retention programs, stating, “Efforts are poorly designed and don't achieve what they are meant to, based on confounding variables and/or poor metrics.” Both of these comments suggest universities may need to carefully consider if their new retention efforts are well designed and actually increase retention results.

Of all the varied retention efforts, it appears faculty believe they really are the key players in student retention. As faculty feel the pressure to be more involved in student retention, will they be able to provide the supportive environment that so many of the students are used to and, in many cases, expect? Will they need to develop new skill sets? What type of training do faculty feel they need to provide this supportive retention environment? As new skills sets and responsibilities are acquired, what prior responsibilities may need to be removed from faculty roles? Although this preliminary research has brought to the surface more questions than it answered, there is one clear takeaway; faculty need more support to adequately meet expanded expectations to increase student retention.

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