Strategic Planning and Retention within the Community Colle Setting

Evon Washington Walters, Shaun McKay[*]

Challenging economic conditions, changing student demographics, and heightened levels of accountability require community colleges to address student retention strategically. A historical summary of the community college serves as the platform for the argument for the use of strategic planning as a tool to address both internal and external challenges. The article highlights components of an effective strategic planning process, in addition to providing a framework from which institutions can develop a process to retain students.

Community colleges are not immune to the numerous external forces demanding accountability as with other American human services enterprises such as four-year colleges, health care systems, and other social services. These forces include reduced funding and increased public, legislative, and accrediting scrutiny, in addition to shifts in the social, political, and market landscape of higher education (Woodard & von Destinon, 2000).

Bryson (1995) stated that the environments of public and non-profit organizations have become not only increasingly uncertain in recent years but also more tightly interconnected; thus, a change anywhere in the system reverberates unpredictably. This increased uncertainty and interconnectedness according to Bryson, requires a threefold response; first, organizations must think strategically as never before; second, organizations must translate their insights into effective strategies to cope with changing circumstances; and third, organizations must develop rationales to lay the groundwork for adopting and implementing strategies.

The increasing impact of such forces now drives institutions to engage in a more proactive, self-reflective, and visioning process to determine the most appropriate direction to take relative to these challenges and their desired future. According to McConkey (1987), effective strategies to deal with such situations require that managers and leaders engage in planning for uncertainty and not for certainty, as it is becoming more difficult to predict the future with any degree of accuracy.

This article presents an overview of the literature that argues for the need and the suitability of embarking upon a comprehensive process of institutional change to address the problem of student retention within the community college setting. This is a process that requires a clear understanding of the existing challenges, firm leadership, and a thorough strategic planning process that engages key stakeholders

[*] *Evon Washington Walters is vice president for student affairs and enrollment management at Montgomery County (PA) Community College. Shaun McKay is campus dean at Suffolk County (NY) Community College. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to ewalters@mc3.edu.*

in rethinking the existing roles, culture, responsibilities, and architectural structures of the institution.

Problem

As community colleges cope with the external forces while at the same time attempting to meet their mission of open access, their work becomes increasingly complex. This difficult task is exacerbated by increasing student enrollments, problems of access and success over the past decade (Pierce, 1996; Seidman, 1995), and shifts in federal and state funding as a result of challenging economic conditions (Guskin, 1994; Leslie, 1995). Enrollment growth in particular has been accompanied by a major shift in the demographic profile of post-secondary students enrolling in community colleges as increasing numbers of students of color and economically disadvantaged students are expected to enroll in these institutions (Chenoweth, 1998; Nora & Rendon, 1990).

Retention of such students at the community college level has become increasingly challenging. This is reflected politically within the existing organizational structure and culture, both organizationally in terms of the institution's capacity to reframe how it conducts business while addressing internal and external pressures. How much should be invested in remediation? To what extent does retention play a major role in the strategic decisions of the college? To what extent should institutions commit constrained resources to support services? The result of these pressures throughout the 1980s and early 1990s enabled institutions to face increased student attrition. According to a study by the American College Testing (ACT) Program (2001), there was a 48.2% dropout rate at two-year public colleges, compared to 31.9% at their four-year public counterparts.

To help administrators understand the demographic, political, and organizational aspects of student retention within the context of community colleges, this article explores historical and conceptual perspectives, salient to any meaningful institutional attempt to address student retention and embark on a process of institutional change. The intention is to move beyond the recent conceptual and programmatic frameworks that were developed to address issues of student retention (Credle & Dean, 1991; Schuh & Whitt, 1999) by proposing a new framework that now addresses the internal challenges of institutional changes.

Background

Research on student retention and persistence took on new urgency in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Astin, 1975; Chickering, 1974; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri 1985; Tinto, 1975). Building upon the 1944 passage of the GI Bill of Rights and the 1947 Truman Commission on Higher Education, the expanded federal aid program mandated by the Higher Education Act of 1965 led to explosive growth in the community college sector in the late 1960s and to increased numbers and high attrition rates of commuter and African American students in the mid-1970s and early 1980s (Astin, 1975; Chickering, 1974; Lang & Ford, 1988). Student profiles

during these years presented a wider range of students in terms of gender, race, ethnic background, socioeconomic levels, and cultural diversity.

Several national studies addressing the retention problem were conducted during this period, including studies by Habley and McClanahan (2004) and by noted scholars such as Astin (1975), Chickering (1974), Beal and Noel (1980), Fleming (1984), and Tinto (1987). They and others launched a national dialogue and inquiry into factors that aided or hindered a student's ability to succeed. Their research highlighted the key role of social and academic integration in student persistence and academic development. Although these groundbreaking studies primarily focused on the four-year college setting, it is widely acknowledged that retention continues to be a major area of institutional concern for community colleges as well.

Research conducted in the late 1980s by Tinto (1987) indicated that one of every two first-year students would eventually drop out of two-year colleges. Subsequent research by Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994) and Napoli and Wortman (1998) found that only one third of all first-time full-time students earned associate degrees or certificates, that graduation rates in the community college sector were substantially lower than those of their four-year counterparts, and that the first-year departure rates of public community college students almost doubled those for four-year colleges.

Despite the compelling nature of such statistics, however, research in this area is still sparse. Tinto's groundbreaking work (1975, 1987) on the academic and social integration of college students is the leading theoretical model for exploring retention within the community college setting. Though Tinto's research primarily examined four-year institutions, many researchers have found some level of applicability of his findings to the two-year setting (Bers & Smith, 1991; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Rendon 1995) and have used it as an exploratory model in their own investigative studies (Beal & Noel, 1980; Conklin, 1995; Feldman, 1993).

Tinto's model emphasizes the effects of two interconnected variables: the student's profile and interactions with the institution. A student profile includes such pre-entry attributes as academic preparedness, family/work obligations, goals/intentions, and socioeconomic status. These attributes, he asserts, influence a student's eventual goals and commitment to an institution, which then interact with such institutional experiences as administrative processes; levels of bureaucracy; academic support services; and interaction with faculty, administrators, and staff. Tinto argues that a student's departure from an institution is a result of the lack of academic and social integration into the institution. Supporting Tinto's assertion is the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), which demonstrated that consistently positive interactions with other college members beyond the classroom setting are a leading predictor of college retention.

Many of the students who converge on two-year campuses today bring with them complex educational histories that may include a hiatus from formal education,

varied academic intentions, inadequate academic preparedness, a low sense of self-efficacy, and unfamiliarity with the college setting (Almeida, 1991; Rendon & Matthews, 1989). The difficulties posed by these characteristics are compounded by the reality that most community college students are commuters and more likely to be besieged with family and employment obligations and economic challenges than most students in traditional four-year colleges (Kerka, 1995; Tinto et al., 1994).

Astin (1985) noted that as many as two-thirds to three-fourths of community college students work either part or full time, making it less likely that students will have opportunities to interact with peers and faculty, participate in student leadership opportunities, or use academic support resources, all of which have been shown to have a positive effect on retention. These demographic realities are in direct conflict with the consistently high-quality interaction between the student and the college that has been shown to enhance student persistence and goal attainment (Hagerdorn, 1999; Nagda, B. A., Gregerman, S. R., Jonides, J., Von-Hippel, W., & Lerner, J. S., 1998; Tinto et al; 1994; Walters, 2003). These realities highlight the need for two-year institutions to become more strategically active and interventionist in their efforts at connecting with the student early and consistently (Coll, 1995; Pascarella et al., 1996; Walters, 2003).

Research provides evidence of a significant connection between organizational culture and student persistence, finding that an institution's cultural environment can have an impact on the student's level of satisfaction, connection, and ability to succeed (Astin, 1993; Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Blau, 1973; Ewell, 1989). Bean (1980, 1983) and Berger and Braxton (1998) assert that students are more likely to persist when they feel welcomed, informed, and consistently involved with faculty and staff. Blau (1973) underscored the negative consequences that a highly bureaucratic system can have for community college students in light of their existing demographic characteristics. Given the different expectations and affective and cognitive needs that these students bring to a campus, it is imperative that these two-year institutions channel every aspect of their resources to maintain a close eye on understanding and responding to the needs of these students.

Any serious attempt at meeting these needs and enhancing retention rates runs into the contentious nature of institutional change (Levitz & Noel, 1997) that challenges deeply held assumptions and practices such as existing policies, day-to-day operations, behaviors, and philosophical approaches in serving students. In his book *Managing Change*, Baker (1998) acknowledges the extreme difficulty of making such institutional changes noting, "Community colleges have become curiously inflexible institutions. The only change we are comfortable with is growth" (p. 3). Baker's statement reflects the self-protective and resistant nature of the community college as an organization and poses a fundamental question that governing boards and state and federal legislators have been asking for the past two decades: Does higher education have the ability and institutional will to embrace a systematic process of self-reflection, assessment, and strategic planning to proactively and comprehensively respond to the challenge of student retention and student success?

Two-year institutions must be willing and able to align their policies and practices with student profiles and changes in the external environment. However, if not presented within the proper context, change can seem threatening, demoralizing, and intimidating (Eckel, Green, & Hill, 2001) and can be easily misconstrued as devaluing an individual's or a department's commitment and accomplishment.

Within the community college setting, the instinctive resistance that Baker (1998) describes may come in various forms, passively in such behaviors as procrastination and endless reviews and discussions (Martin, 1995) or more directly as within the language of collective bargaining. As Guskin and Marcy (2003) observe, "Organizational systems in colleges and universities … are built to maintain present operations and to accommodate occasional incremental adjustments. Major changes in basic operating processes and procedures are likely to be resisted and are usually avoided" (p. 9). Colleges that fail to respond to the urgent need for accessibility and affordability by ignoring demographic and technological changes may endanger the future of their institutions (Guskin & Marcy, 2003; Marshal, 2004).

Recommendations

In light of this state of affairs and existing research, we advocate the use of a comprehensive and flexible strategic planning process as a way of preserving the core mission of the two-year institution – facilitating student success – while challenging assumptions about existing structures and processes (Keller, 1999-2000). Kotler and Murphy (1981) explain that if colleges are to survive in the troubled years ahead, a strong emphasis on planning is essential. According to Gorski (1991), the strategic planning process can be a means of engendering good will and trust among internal constituents. Trust, according to Opatz and Hutchinson (1998-1999), is a central element in having a successful process that involves participation from the broader campus.

Lorenzo (1993) expands on this point by emphasizing the importance of focusing on the process over the end result. This is a key point in light of the decentralized mode of operation within community colleges and research that confirms the need for enhanced internal collaboration in connecting students personally, socially, and academically to the attending institution (Sandler, 1998; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). More importantly, strategic planning is a process by which an institution can envision its future in full recognition of its internal and external issues (Drucker, 1990; Gilley, Fulmer, & Reithlingschoefer, 1986) and ensure that all of its key internal stakeholders – administrators, faculty, staff, and students – are working toward the same goals (Glass, 1991).

Within the context of the community college setting, external stakeholders, including prospective students, local businesses, and political figures are increasingly utilizing their influence upon the community college to address their expectations. These expectations include meeting the challenges of a growing but diverse student population; serving as the training ground to respond to increasing industrial globalization; and meeting the immediate training or retraining needs of the local economy.

In order to use strategic planning to address the issues of institutional retention, the following should serve as the core components of the process:

a. Revisit the mission statement
b. Determine the internal and external strengths and weaknesses of the institution
c. From that determination, establish and prioritize feasible goals and objectives that are benchmarked, assessed continuously, and integrated into the existing organizational structure and culture.
d. Align funding sources with the goals and objectives of the planning system.
e. Establish clear lines of accountability and performance review dates with respect to expectations and evaluation.
f. Ensure that within the strategic plan is a core philosophy that deals with strategic enrollment management.
g. Engage in ongoing professional development training to increase participation, transparency and ownership of the planning process.

Review Mission Statement

Because of the dynamic nature of the external environment and the expected increases in both enrollment and diversity, community colleges must revisit their mission statements and increase their multicultural awareness capacity (Walters, 1996) to better respond to the needs of incoming students. A critical step will be to re-establish a clear understanding of the institution's values and principles relative to internal infrastructures and external markets. The external pressures of enhanced accountability and the lack of a uniform definition for student success require that community colleges place a greater emphasis and flexibility on meeting the needs of learners in order to establish a solid foundation for successful retention.

Today within the community college genre, "student-centered," "learning centered," and "learner focused" are much admired phrases inscribed by many institutions to acknowledge an awareness by the institution to remain informed. Community colleges must align their values and principles with the needs of students, which will require the reconceptualization of academic and student support service areas.

An example of an institutional attempt to re-examine these existing values might be the establishment of a core principle stating that the college aspires to be the pre-eminent two-year institution in terms of student accessibility and use of technology in learning. The missing component in this statement is the lack of supporting language to indicate how the institution intends to introduce, implement, and ensure the successful use of its technology by all of its students, many of whom may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with technology or may not have access. Such an incomplete statement represents a virtuous but impracticable attempt that is not aligned with the reality of changing student demographics. A dynamic mission in tune with the present needs and realities of colleges should provide a clear sense of what is being done daily.

Efforts to make retention an institutionalized priority should be fully examined in light of whether or not it is reflected in every institutional value, ritual, policy, and budgetary measure. The central questions include the following:

    a.   What is the institutional definition of retention?
    b.   Based on this definition, what has been the institution's history?

Assess the Environment

Though the environmental scanning process can reduce levels of uncertainty that community colleges may experience, equally important is the participation of key constituencies in the gathering of information, analysis, and trend formulation. This approach brings instant credibility to the planning process and engages all sectors of the institution in useful conversations that propel those critical success factors that are the means to an end into the forefront.

Community colleges must engage their constituencies in the learning process and utilize their strengths to deploy a comprehensive strategic plan. This critical utilization of human resources allows the college to expose current challenges and future opportunities while recognizing its strength within the community or region. Such a comprehensive approach will allow the two-year institutions to explore (a) the contextual and historical factors that shape the lives of these students, and (b) the programmatic and systemic issues relative to the internal infrastructure of the institution.

Assessing the institution's environment, involves identifying internal and external strengths and weaknesses. This enables the institution to develop a more comprehensive sense of what is working well and what is not, coupled with identifying potential opportunities and threats in areas such as retention. This not only provides a foundation for continuing the process in a meaningful way, but a roadmap for critical collaborative participation, intervention, and success. It is imperative however to define from an internal perspective the key questions that can serve as a framework to guide the institution's careful self-analysis of its own system:

    a.   Are there clearly defined institutional expectations for student success?
    b.   Does the strategic and operational planning processes include clearly stated goals and objectives to deal with student retention and student success?
    c.   Is there a clearly stated mission that defines the means to accomplish student success and retention?
    d.   Are retention activities structured or centralized to a point where there is evidence of on-going collaboration, communication and points of proactive intervention from student intake to exit?
    e.   What mechanisms does the college utilize to collect its data regarding retention and how does the data analysis improve and enhance the retention rates?
    f.   To what extent does institutional funding and strategic planning reflect retention as a priority?

g. To what extent do internal and external environmental scanning affect/engage policy development and institutional change?

Collaboration via institutional research should determine such variables as enrollment forecasting, the impact of the local economy relative to job training or displacements, high school performance, and student graduation.

Collect Data and Establish Accountability

The third and fourth components of this process center on determining the institution's goals, priorities, and objectives. This phase involves gathering all relevant information regarding retention and framing it within the context of the institution's mission, its core values, and existing resources. Clear lines of accountability should be established, along with timelines that will provide the institution with a credible and consistent means of assessing progress.

All steps provide a framework in which an institution will be able to simultaneously focus on the present and the future. These discussions should be facilitated via the development of a cohesive leadership team (Rouche, Baker, & Rose 1989), such as a cross-disciplinary and cross-divisional retention council. Central to the success of such a team is the careful selection of a chairperson who will provide the leadership necessary for guiding the process and act as a coalition builder based on a clear understanding of the existing college environment (Cohen & Eimicke, 1995). The assigned person should have the general respect of the college as a whole and be skilled in designing, scheduling, and facilitating the process of change.

From a procedural perspective, care should be taken to ensure an inclusive process that encourages input from all constituents within the institution (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) and outside it (e.g., students who have withdrawn, high school counselors, potential employers). Each of these constituencies can contribute valuable information to the process. Communication, data gathering, and consistent information sharing are key in facilitating discussions among participants by providing real numbers rather than anecdotal evidence. A well publicized schedule of open forums is one example of efforts that can be made to reach out to the broader campus community. Such events should be collaborative ones involving representatives from academic departments, administrative divisions, and student government.

The leadership of the college president is crucial to the success of the strategic planning process. According to Rouche et al. (1989), leadership should engender collaboration around an organizational vision. Presidential leadership should reinforce, reaffirm, and motivate all constituents. The president must be astutely and passionately aware of the challenges, rationale for change, and the envisioned benefits for the college and the broader community. The president must set priorities and promote collaboration by objectively reviewing the progress to provide feedback. Presidential leadership should serve as the catalyst for setting the focus and keeping the momentum going.

Readers are encouraged to explore existing resources that provide examples of success stories as well as suggest alternative conceptual or programmatic frameworks. These resources include the following:

- The Center for the Study of College Student Retention, their *Journal of College Research and Retention* and their web site, http://www.cscsr.org/ provide the latest retention-related research.
- New Directions for Community Colleges Website: http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-5509.html
- Barr, R. B. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new reality for community colleges: *Leadership abstracts, 8*(3). *http://www.league.org/publication/abstracts/leadership/labs0395.htm*
- Barr, R. B,. & Tagg, J. (1995, November/December). From teaching to learning – A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change, 27 (6), 12-25.*
- Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (1994). *Managing community colleges: A handbook for effective practice.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kezar, A. J. (2000). *Higher education trends: Government and policy.* Eric Clearing House on Higher Education. (ERIC Document Production Service No. ED435353)
- O'Banion, T. (1997). *A learning college for the 21ˢᵗ century.* Phoenix: The Oryx Press.
- Noel-Levitz consulting has documented success stories on student retention initiatives at the community college level, available at their web site (www.noel-levitz.com).
- League for Innovation website http://www.league.org/league/about/about_main.htm
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline.* New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) was launched in 2001, with the intention of producing information about the quality and performance of community colleges. Additionally it provides value to institutions in their efforts to improve student learning and retention.
- The Community College Research Center (CCRC), established in 1996, has a mission to carry out and promote research on major issues affecting the development, growth, and changing roles of community colleges. Their website is http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of accessibility, quality education, and enhanced retention efforts, orchestrating change at the community college level will remain a key leadership challenge. Issues of shared governance, collective bargaining, and decentralized decision-making are a few of the complex internal issues that community colleges will have to grapple with. Community colleges must forge ahead with collaborative efforts to address retention. Goals, objectives, and budgets must be driven by the strategic plan, with a clearly attached formula for accountability via assessments and

outcomes. This approach as viewed by Kotler and Murphy (1981) must be at the core of the strategic planning process if community colleges are to survive in the troubled years ahead. Kotler and Murphy both believed that most colleges were not set up with a strategic planning capacity, but were designed to implement day-to-day operations.

Therefore, maintaining a pulse on the community will be inseparable from maintaining institutional momentum. The college president needs a clear understanding of the current internal and external issues, changing student demographics, high school graduation rates and existing economic conditions. According to Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeiffer (1993), the college president must be willing to

- Transfer appropriate levels of responsibility and authority for the execution of strategic planning.
- Promote an acceptance of the participation of managers and non-managers who, although not a part of the formal planning team, will be responsible for the implementation of planning decisions.
- Provide overall direction and assume ultimate responsibility for the creation and execution of the strategic plan.
- Instill enthusiasm while coaching employees through transformational or architectural change.
- Most importantly, must be committed to ensure that the organization's new strategy, when fully developed, is clearly articulated at every level of the organization through divisional and departmental structures, down to the smallest work unit and individual employee. (pp. 100-101)

Today more than ever before, two-year institutions will have to refocus their efforts from "doing more with less" in order to adapt to the needs of the learner. Many other factors related to student retention will undoubtedly surface when conducting such a process, determined by the context of an institution's own unique social and political environment. Thus it is important to note that patience, flexibility, collaborative participation, and persistence should characterize the strategic planning process in its evolution to respond to these extraneous factors.

Certainly the process of institutional change will not be as direct or fluid as described in this piece. But nurturing and developing a shared purpose and stronger working relationships among faculty, academic administrators, institutional researchers, and student services staff, will ultimately be key to the tone and pace of such an undertaking (Kuh, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996).

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