An Exploration of the Relationship between Student Retention and Self-Efficacy

Rachel Cinquepalmi
Tarleton State University

Within the expansion of globalization, there have been numerous theories seeking to explore potential improvement strategies for university student retention. Findings and research have discovered that a culmination of non-academic and academic factors contribute to an increased retention rate within universities. Self-efficacy is merely one of these factors, which plays a substantial role in a student’s coping ability, thus increasing self-confidence. This article seeks to explore the foundations of what could serve as an institutional model for retention based on non-academic factors, academic factors, and self-efficacy.

Keywords: retention, self-efficacy, coping

Globalization has attracted individuals to postsecondary education, as it is necessary to remain economically competitive. Yet, a need remains in order to enhance retention rates through the development of tailored and complex plans and programs. Educational policy leaders such as Veronica Lotkowski, Steven Robbins, and Richard Noeth have explored the need for retentions programs, which address both non-academic and academic factors. Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth (2004) have indicated in their studies that the non-academic factor of academic-related skills, academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, social support, certain contextual influences, and social involvement all had a positive relationship to retention.
In addition to the possession of necessary skills, the improvement of one’s self-efficacy produces a higher rate of desired effects, thus positively influencing a student’s success.

In Cindy Veenstra’s article reviewing a strategy for improving freshman college retention, it was found that education leaders such as Vincent Tinto have indicated that we are in dire need for an institutional model for helping students succeed. According to the article, what is needed and what is not yet available is a model of institutional action that provides guidelines for the development of effective policies and programs that institutions can reasonably employ to enhance the persistence of all their students (Veenstra, 2009, p.6). While college students emerge into the university setting with varying personality traits, backgrounds, and goals, the institutional action may call for additional student support activities which include both non-academic and academic measures.

The transition into the university setting has been widely studied for many years as orientations, freshman seminars, and additional extracurricular programs have been implemented in order to improve the introductory experience. The thought of reinforcing student involvement outside of the classroom was a notion driven by student affairs professionals who sought to provide their universities with retention activities and programs. Tinto (2007) described this early work on retention as the “age of involvement” which rushed into service a range of programs to enrich the freshman year experience ranging from expanded and extended orientation to a variety of extracurricular programs. As a result, these infant programs lacked complexity as they failed to consider the experience of students as well as the students varying in gender, race, ethnicity, income, and orientation.
As critical as these non-academic factors are, the importance of academic student support services must not be ignored. Veenstra (2009) expressed the need for additional resources including tutoring, mentoring, and advising in combination with faculty involvement. Literature supports the need for intensive assistance in addition to an ongoing program that occurs early in the first semester.

As this culmination of non-academic and academic factors collide, there remains one factor which has been proven to influence one’s success. DeWitz, Woolsey, and Walsh (2009) expressed the struggle to incorporate the opportunity, the means, and the motivation. Self-efficacy was the one common denominator found in successful individuals as it is notably defined as the levels of an individual’s self-confidence. The correlations between self-efficacy, goal orientation, and an individual’s coping skills all relate to increased levels of success.

In order for a student to persist through adversity and persevere to achieving his or her college degree, he or she must actively feel a sense of meaning, become determined to set goals, and connect to the institution and to those around them. While high school GPA is a predictor of college success, several studies have shown student motivation to be a strong predictor of persistence (DeWitz, et al., 2009). Personal efficacy expectations are expected to impact behavior, how much effort will be applied to attain an outcome, and the level of persistence devoted to overcoming hindrances (Devonport & Lane, 2006, p. 127).

Developing a ‘sense of belonging’ is critical to the success of college students, particularly for the retention of students who are considered to be at risk of non-completion (O’Keeffe, 2013, p. 4). The development of an individual’s feelings of purpose in life certainly correlate to the value found in self-efficacy. Researchers studying students, who considered
leaving college, found that many of these individuals described dissatisfaction with their college social life and experiences (DeWitz, et al., 2009). While the interrelationship between purpose of life and self-efficacy exists, the parallel between self-efficacy and coping may be even more profound.

One strategy seeking to enhance self-efficacy is to consider the way in which students cope with stressful encounters (Devonport & Lane, 2006). There are many ways in which students may choose to cope, and responses to stress may include venting, positive reframing, denial, etc. Several studies lend support to the idea of creating interventions based on self-efficacy theory to positively influence behaviors that improve or augment students’ subjective sense of purpose in life (DeWitz, et al., 2009, p. 11). With this complexity of student retention comes the range of models, including sociological and psychological factors in nature that have been proposed to the task of explaining student attrition (Tinto, 2007).

As higher education models for retention are created, student affairs professionals and faculty alike must seek to create a welcoming environment where care, warmth and acceptance are promoted, in order to achieve improved student retention (O’Keefe, 2013). Furthermore, coping strategies such as cognitive and secondary appraisal should be highly encouraged among those who influence students. Just as self-efficacy has been linked with success, active coping methods have been linked with higher self-efficacy rates among individuals.

Within the realms of academic factors regarding faculty and staff development, it is increasingly clear that faculty actions, especially in the classroom, are critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention (Tinto, 2007, pg 7). While we unfortunately do not know the specific ways in which varying development programs impact student attrition, we do know the
significance surrounding faculty teaching methods. Additional support including supplementary resources and professional development opportunities may be included in a model of institutional action.

In moving toward success with this issue, it is apparent that student retention is a highly sought after topic in higher education. The increased number of students attaining undergraduate and graduate degrees has flourished, and with this advantage comes a matter of contention. The need for a multi-layered model for student retention is illusive, but not discovered. Academic factors including tutoring, mentoring, and advising must not be ignored, while non-academic factors including counseling or facilitating welcoming environments inside and out of the classroom are equally as vital. Finally, opportunities presenting coping strategies must be made apparent and accessible to all students within the model and plan. Additional research in the areas of self-efficacy beliefs and associations could provide valuable information for those seeking to improve the lives of students in higher education (DeWitz, et al., 2009).
References


