Innovative Practice

Systemic Problem Solving: Retention and the Role of a Student Counseling Center

Dianne L. Phillips-Miller
Charles R. Morrison

This article describes a counseling center’s experience using a “systems” approach to address student retention by initiating campuswide collaboration.

Broadly defined, retention refers to processes by which a college or university provides students with the academic, social, and other support they need to maintain their enrollment through graduation. A complex issue, retention involves social, emotional, and intellectual development of as well as financial support for students (Gerdes & Mailinckrodt, 1994; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Pascarella, 1986; Stodt & Klepper, 1987; Tinto, 1993). College graduates earned, on average, 65% more in 1992 than did high school graduates, up from 45% in 1981 (Hoyt & Lester, 1995), and experience unemployment rates that are three times lower than those of high school graduates. Therefore, student retention is an important investment (Ottinger, 1990).

In 1994, the University of Idaho commissioned Noel and Levitz (1994) to review and analyze enrollment potential, including both recruitment and retention potential, at the institution. Findings indicated that the university had a freshman attrition rate similar to that of comparable public institutions (23% vs. 19.6%) but a lower graduation rate (48% after 7 years vs. 53.8% after 5 years). For a variety of reasons, the university was losing more than half of its students before graduation with more than 50% leaving with a grade point average of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale) or better. Although not all attrition should be viewed negatively, this state of affairs was of concern to both academic and student affairs units. The Student Counseling Center prepared itself to take a leadership role in implementing a systemic approach to retention at the university.

*Dianne L. Phillips-Miller is an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology, and Charles R. Morrison is a licensed psychologist with the Student Counseling Center, both at the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. The authors thank members of the work group, the Vice President for Student Affairs, and the Provost. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Dianne L. Phillips-Miller, 209 Education Building, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844-3085 (e-mail: diannep@uidaho.edu).*
A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Basic criteria of a systems perspective include the following:

1. A shift in focus from the parts to the whole
2. An ability to shift one’s attention back and forth between different levels of the system
3. Contextual thinking (i.e., recognition that the properties of one part of the system cannot be understood without their being viewed in the context of the whole system)
4. A shift in focus from objects to relationships in the system
5. A shift from linear, cause-and-effect problem analysis to analysis of networks of relationships
6. A view of systems as dynamic webs of interrelated events in which none of the properties of the web is fundamental but in which each follows from the properties of the other parts
7. A shift from objective to epistemic science, which incorporates an understanding of the process of knowing (Capra, 1996; Senge, 1990; Wheatley, 1994; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996)

SYSTEMIC PROBLEM SOLVING

Given that student retention is an issue that influences and is influenced by all levels of the university system, the development of long-range, effective approaches to increasing student retention requires comprehensive involvement (Noel et al., 1985; Tinto, 1993, 1997). The Student Counseling Center, therefore, recommended to the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Provost that a campuswide work group be established to follow up on the Noel and Levitz (1994) study by investigating the role of career development in student retention at the university.

There is evidence that the services offered by counseling centers contribute to the retention of students who use them. However, because as many as 95% of students indicate a need for career development assistance, the Counseling Center staff felt they could provide the most benefit to the institution and students by focusing on this aspect of services (Bishop & Brenneman, 1986; Illovsy, 1997; Patti, 1993; Wilson, Mason, & Ewing, 1997). The work group also was mandated to review all university processes relevant to student retention from recruitment through graduation. The Counseling Center director, who served as cochair, and three staff invited the following groups and individuals to be represented in this campuswide initiative:

1. Associate deans and academic department heads
2. Career Services
3. Student Advisory Services
4. Cooperative Education
5. Service Learning
6. The Tutoring and Academic Assistance Center
7. Student Support Services
8. Athletic Academic Services
9. New Student Services
10. Housing
11. Program Review and Assessment
12. The Registrar

SYSTEMIC PROBLEM SOLVING IN ACTION

During the first few meetings of the work group, the tendency was to identify individual problematic aspects of the retention process and to move to immediately develop programs or changes to address them. Although these were legitimate concerns, this approach would have led to isolated programs and partial solutions because it violated all of the characteristics of a systems approach. There was little understanding that the problem arose naturally from the relationships between a wide variety of factors within the institution. This quick fix approach was influenced by a linear way of looking at retention. Systemic problem solving required the work group to delay the generation of solutions until the problem had been considered in the context of the entire university through broad representation in the work group.

To increase the likelihood that effective change would occur, the work group posed the following questions when considering an issue:

1. What assumptions underlie this policy/practice/change?
2. How does this problem/change influence the institution as a whole?
3. How do various levels of the institution affect this problem/change?
4. What actions are needed at each level to create effective, sustainable change?

These questions embodied a systems perspective of retention by acknowledging that without integration and consistency of philosophy, policy, and procedure at all levels, any change to improve student retention was likely to have minimal long-term impact.

BENEFITS TO THE COUNSELING CENTER

The commitment of resources to the work group has benefited the Student Counseling Center by creating an expanded vision of work with students at a time when counseling services often resemble outpatient mental health clinics more than programs to promote the development of all students (Stone & Archer, 1990). Participation also created new relationships between academic and student affairs offices that provide many possibilities for col-
laborative programming and increased visibility, both of which are important when decisions are made about resource allocation.

Using a systems perspective can be a tremendous asset because the process that it generates is crucial to creating effective solutions to retention issues on campus (Tinto, 1993, 1997). Each campus will be somewhat unique with regard to which retention issues are most relevant to its student body and in its administrative structure and resources. However, what every institution that uses a systemic approach to improve student retention will have in common is a system of people working together to transform institutional systems.

REFERENCES


