Understanding the Synergistic Relationship between Student Retention and Student Development Theories

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Abstract

Though theories about retention and student development have been in the literature for decades, they have mainly existed in silos with little exploration of how they could or should be used together. This scholarly paper seeks to engage with the idea that there are synergistic connections between student development and retention theories that could further promote student success.

Keywords: student development; retention; performance metrics

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The emphasis on accountability has drawn public attention to how institutions consider student success. The launch of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) Score Card (https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/) facilitates viewing student success metrics, particularly 8-year graduation rate, students who return after their first year, average annual cost, and median earnings of graduates at any institution. These metrics indicate "something" about students' experiences, but they are incomplete. Troubling, these data points are indicators of inequity in degree attainment and persistence for racially minoritized students in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). As an example, the failure to disaggregate graduation rates by race and ethnicity can obscure the public's understanding of data by allowing them to think institutions have promising track records of first year to second year retention rates for all students. What is less clear is how institutions should center and promote the success of their students when there are differing definitions and levels of student success.

While retention is an institutional characteristic, persistence is more focused on the student continuing at any institution, not just the one where their academic journey began. Student success from an institutional perspective can be seen as degree completion, retention within the institution, or academic progress regardless of the starting institution. From the individual perspective student success can be seen as the student accomplishing their goal, which may not include completion. The accountability movement within the U.S. has mainly focused on student success in regard to institutional definitions (Torres & Renn, 2021). This juxtaposition creates artificial arguments with success being when students meet their goals, while others would say that success can only be measured through completion and retention metrics. Because of this debate, we compel institutional agents to consider retention and development theories together rather than independently.

Over the past decade research on student retention and student development has expanded our understanding of the behaviors involved within both scholarly topics, yet there is little literature that connects these research foci to better understand how a college student's development may influence the behaviors and choices typically expected within retention theories. Because the existence of these two bodies of literature have been as silos with little exploration of the synergy between these theoretical approaches, in this essay, we seek to connect and explain the synergy between student development and retention.

To organize these connections, it is important to begin with understanding the purpose of these theories. Then we explore the elements of retention theories and how they can be connected to student development. The final section focuses on how practices intended to promote student success by increasing retention can do harm

if students' development is not considered.

Purpose of the Theories

Theories within student development seek to provide an understanding of "the experiences of college students" (Jones, 2019, p. 9). These theories are considered the foundation that guides practice within student affairs and higher education (Patton et al., 2016). Early theories were somewhat linear and focused on development as the ability to appreciate greater complexity around how a student sees knowledge, themselves, and interactions with others. Jones and Stewart (2016) introduced the idea of seeing the evolution of student development theories through theories into separate domains, such as cognitive or psychosocial, and tended to be sequential in nature. The second wave of theories were more focused on social identities and nondominant groups of college students that were often excluded from studies creating first wave theories. The third wave of theories place emphasis on social transformation and structures of inequalities by "integrating theory and practice through praxis to promote social change" (Jones, 2019, p. 11). It should be noted that within this third wave, we are seeing researchers consider student success practices through the lens of transforming structural inequalities.

In general, student development theories focus on the individual student and how their experiences while in college influence their sense of self in relation to others. These theories are used in practice to assure the whole college student is considered when policies and programs are enacted by an institution. On the other hand, retention theories are often focused on characteristics and behaviors that predict the likelihood that a student will be successful in college. Additionally, these theories often focus on the student's academic and social integration into a college or university context (Tinto, 1993). Within these theories student success tends to be defined as a student being retained at the institution. These theories can align with metrics created by those outside the academy and which higher education institutions are expected to meet as well as use to drive institutional decisions (Torres & Renn, 2021). This approach focuses on what is best for the institution and may not consider the student's best interest.

Because retention is mainly an institutional metric to determine students who remain and graduate from the same institution, theories are focused on understanding the points or levers (Braxton et al., 2014) institutions can use to retain students at their institution. These theories tend to look at student characteristics to determine the likelihood they will be retained (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Early models focused on the notion that the more involved a student is in a campus environment the more likely they are to be retained (Astin, 1993). Subsequently, the student engagement era focused on the reciprocal relationship between what the student does to get involved on campus and what the institutional agents do to create conditions for students to get involved (Kuh, 2005; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). More recent research around retention focuses on organizational characteristics (Renn & Reason, 2021) or programs (Kuh, 2008)

institutional agents do to create conditions for students to get involved (Kuh, 2005; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). More recent research around retention focuses on organizational characteristics (Renn & Reason, 2021) or programs (Kuh, 2008) institutional agents enact that promote the retention of students. The most widely used term for these programs is high-impact practices (e.g., study abroad, learning communities, service-learning, undergraduate research, first-year seminar, internship or field experience) because these activities have a larger impact on student success and students who participated were found to be more likely to be retained (Kuh, 2005).

At the center of both types of theories is the student. Both student development and retention theories consider the behaviors and decisions students make while in higher education institutions. The distinctive elements are about how to look at these behaviors. Student development would consider why the student chose something and how they make meaning of the experience. Retention theory would focus on the undertaking of the behavior—whether or not participation occurred; thus, assuming participation will promote retention. In reality, it is clearly important to consider both the act of participating as well as understanding why a student chooses to participate. By considering both elements one can determine if high-impact practices are done well or if the emphasis is only on the mechanics of the activity.

Connected Elements in both Retention and Student Development Theories

Student development and retention theories can be extended by focusing on what institutional agents do to create meaningful and culturally relevant practices for students to succeed (Museus, 2014). The behavior alone will not change, or develop, the student; rather it is how institutional agents engage the student to critically examine ideas while also developing a connection to others that can create the lifelong learners that will contribute to society. To understand how to incorporate both types of theories in practice, we share the elements of the theories and problematize how not considering both types of behaviors may not benefit the students.

Inputs

The term input focuses on students' characteristics and experiences prior to entering higher education institutions. Individual student characteristics include social identities such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Some experiences prior to entering higher education institutions are inferred by parents' educational level and high school GPA. These student demographic characteristics take on different meaning within the literature depending on the author's orientation towards knowledge creation. For example, race and ethnicity can be used as a predictive variable in retention and as development tasks in student development theories. When used as a predictive variable, the researcher ignores the developmental tasks that students have

engaged with and likely developed greater agency and capital (Yosso, 2005). Without truly considering the development of students, institutions would only be confident that white and wealthy students would be the ones to succeed. This makes the sole reliance on individual characteristics dangerous and inequitable.

Socialization/Integration

The idea that students are socialized into the college environment (Weidman, 1989) is also a connected element in both theories. Within retention theories this element is focused on institutional fit with the institution's campus and culture. Student development theories would consider this element as societal influences that inform how a person interacts with others (Kroger, 2004).

While institutions place pressure on students to integrate themselves into the college environment, this approach has been critiqued as oppressing those who are not from financially affluent white culture (Lewis et al., 2000; Rendón, 1994; Tierney, 1992). The view that students benefit when they "fit-in" while in college is mainly focused on residential, historically white, and highly selective institutions that attract full-time students who do not have to work more than a few hours a week and can be involved on campus. Scholars argue that traditional frameworks associated with ideas of "fit" can perpetuate an assimilationist perspective that students, particularly students of color, are asked to set aside their cultures and backgrounds in order to integrate socially and academically into an environment (Dowd et al., 2011; Museus, 2014). This approach can neglect the millions of students who come to class and leave because they have work and familial obligations and seek out support systems that maintain critical ties to their cultural heritages (e.g., Kiyama et al., 2015; Rendón et al., 2000; Torres, et al., 2019; Zerquera et al., 2018). Because many retention models were based on samples of white students, Rendón et al. (2020) called on challenging traditional models of retention to center the experiences of students to uncover how race, gender, class, religion, and different identities influence the retention of students in diverse learning environments.

At this intersection, Museus (2014) created the Culturally Engaging Campus Envi-ronments model (CECE, pronounced see-see) to underscore the importance of what environments do to reflect and respond to the cultural communities of students to promote their success. This conceptual framework is based on two decades of scholar-ship emphasizing factors that are correlated to key outcomes such as sense of belonging and motivation for students of color (Museus & Smith, 2014; Museus et al., 2018). The CECE model posits nine characteristics of a culturally engaging campus environment divided into five indicators focused on ways institutional environments are relevant to the cultures and identities of students (Cultural Familiarity, Culturally Relevant Knowledge, Cultural Community Services, Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement, and Cultural Validation) and four indicators that emphasize ways institutional agents respond to the cultural norms and needs of diverse student populations (Collectivist Cultural Orientations, Human-

ized Educational Environments, Proactive Philosophies, and Holistic Support). This attention to the responsiveness of campus environments is pertinent to better understanding the organizational components of retention theories. Though finding support is important for students on any campus, it is important to look beyond the integration of students and consider how the environment can be welcoming or hostile. Institutional agents can create programs that would reflect culturally engaging aspects for all students. This will require an expanded idea of socialization into the institution.

Organizational

Organizational elements in retention theories are focused on policies, practices, and programs (Renn & Reason, 2021). These elements, in turn, influence outcomes for students. Within student development the organizational environment is considered through the lens of how the campus climate creates a welcoming or not-welcoming space for students from various backgrounds. Decades of scholarship has illustrated how the disquieting influence of hostile campus climates for students from marginalized religious, gender, and racial backgrounds can negatively influence student retention and degree attainment (e.g., Museus, 2008; 2014; Rankin, 2004). Hurtado et al. (2012) introduced the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) model to emphasize the intersection between external (policies or laws) and internal (practices or curriculum) influences that interact to create campus climate that can inhibit or promote diverse learning for all. When institutional agents only focus on one layer of the ecosystem, they are ignoring the interactions between various layers and the student experience. This is the reason success must include the development of the individual student.

One of the common organizational practices that many institutions use is living on-campus to better connect students with the campus culture. This requirement was first introduced by Astin (1993) and seems to receive universal acceptance that student success is enhanced when students live on-campus. A less considered aspect of on-campus living is how these spaces can be hostile for some students and unaffordable for others. Recently, scholars used third-wave approaches to the student experience allowing them to look at the residential environment and questioning if these spaces are continuing racial segregation, upholding whiteness, and not fostering the welcoming environment that is assumed (Foste, 2021).

Practices Used to Retain Students Must Consider Students' Development

The most important reason to consider students' development when working on student success is to consider how practices influence students' sense of self and their personal communities. To explore these areas, we identify common practices that institutions use to improve student success and interrogate how these practices impact students' development.

Time to Degree Metrics

Some of the common practices used to promote appropriate time to degree are taking a full course load (15 credit hours each semester) and restricting excess credit hours by charging more tuition beyond a certain point of credit accumulation. Both of these practices provide positive sound bites for administrators and promote a sense that the institution is looking out for the student to accrue less debt and move through a degree program more efficiently. In reality, these practices assume all students are dependent on parents, financially affluent, have access to career planning prior to starting college, and are completely committed to a major from the first semester of their college career. There is little room for undecided students with these practices. These practices reinforce a deficit-oriented view of students because students who do not have access to these resources are often blamed or perceived as failures and underprepared rather than focusing on what the institution is doing to meaningfully support students in exploring their academic interests.

From the student development theories, we know that students are externally defined well into their college years (Baxter Magolda, 2009) and may not have the capacity to make career decisions in their first year of college. In addition, low-income students have less understanding of how to navigate institutions in order to use the resources that may be available to them. Students who work while in college make decisions that are dependent on more than time to degree. These metrics are also unfair to students who begin at community colleges and transfer to four-year institutions. Transfer students are more likely to lose credits during the transfer process and are less likely to be able to register for needed classes in their first semester.

When we consider the complete picture of time to degree metrics, one can see that these metrics mainly reward institutions that attract traditional aged, economically wealthy students who have parents that attended college and can help them navigate the systems. Meanwhile, these metrics can punish students without previous knowledge of college and who are likely low-income, first-generation in college, and may not have attended high-performing high schools.

High-Impact Practices

High-impact practices (HIPs) is a popular term used for a set of curricular and co-curricular experiences with evidence to suggest that students who participate in these experiences can make integrated learning and practical gains such as deepened critical thinking and greater engagement in the campus environment (Finley, 2019; Kinzie & Kuh, 2018; Kuh, 2008). In alignment with the retention and accountability movement, more institutions have latched onto the benefits of creating HIPs for all students. However, attention to equitable design and implementation of HIPs is where the intersection of student development and retention theories needs more attention.

For example, some institutions have sought to make study abroad experiences a required component of all undergraduate student curricula. This approach focuses on the

mechanics of the activity and emphasizes the silo of foregrounding retention as the rationale for the requirement. Yet, students who study abroad do not uniformly make gains on outcomes such as cross-cultural engagement and critical thinking. Using student development theory and retention theories synergistically may inform how institutional agents can better advise students on study abroad experiences that may be particularly meaningful. For instance, a student who identifies as Asian American whose ethnic identity is Vietnamese, from an identity development standpoint may be seeking a study abroad opportunity to learn more about their ethnic origin. From a retention standpoint, the student may be seeking opportunities to draw connections between using their careers to give back to their home communities after graduation, consistent with the third wave movement of student development theory (Jones, 2019; Museus, 2014). Therefore, institutional agents should understand the "why" behind a student's desire to study abroad rather than only the act of participation. By engaging in this practice, institutional agents can design opportunities to meet students' need and to incorporate culturally responsive elements into the practice. This reflective practice can be applied to the design and implementation of all HIPs.

Academic Advising

Given that students are often externally defined early in college, academic advising plays an integral role for students seeking to maximize their time to degree while also exploring their own academic interests. Oftentimes, early and consistent feedback are used as measures of ensuring student retention. Students who attend institutions with intrusive advising are often required to meet with academic advisors at least once a semester to ensure they are meeting requirements for degree programs. Yet, integrating student development theory with the practice of academic advising shifts the focus to students seeing academic advisors as institutional agents who can provide them with the support that they need or refer them to someone who can (Museus, 2021; Museus & Ravello, 2010). However, not all students see academic advisors as trusted sources of information and from a cultural standpoint may seek support from peers or family members (Torres et al., 2006). Institutions that have large numbers of first-generation and marginalized students often do not have sufficient funding to create intrusive advising and may leave students to advice themselves by looking at the web site. However, these students may not understand the nuances in course sequences and how academic requirements must be met.

The accountability movement in higher education focuses on getting students through in a timely fashion and rewards students who have had access to courses such as advanced placement and international baccalaureate in high school. Once again, the emphasis on retention and accountability as student success metrics can be harmful and serve to benefit affluent students who are more likely to be enrolled in such courses. Assuming a developmental approach would humanize the relationship between advisor and student rather than emphasize the transactional aspect of meeting requirements (Museus, 2021). Therefore, academic advisors can perpetuate inequities if they focus

predominantly on students meeting degree requirements as opposed to cultivating their interests and sense of self by helping them connect what they are doing in higher education with how they engage their cultural identities and home communities.

Large Lectures

Many instructors are required to teach introductory courses in large lecture formats. These types of courses often reinforce a banking model of education where the instructor holds the expertise and knowledge and banks this information into students who are asked to memorize and regurgitate information on exams. From a student development focus, this structure can reinforce less complex perspectives of cognitive development because students may see instructors as authority figures who hold the power in a learning environment (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Perry, 1999). Students may also feel physically and emotionally distant from the "sage on the stage" at a time developmentally when they need to know that instructors see them as individuals capable of learning and contributing. When institutional agents present large lectures or introductory courses in chemistry or economics as weed-out courses, higher education structures can preserve notions of those who are prepared from high school to succeed and those who are not. However, institutional agents can create conditions in large lecture courses to disrupt assumptions about student success in these types of courses. Faculty members can focus on ways to validate students as knowers, provide co-curricular support systems, and engage in developmentally appropriate teaching practices (e.g., scaffolding the information, providing flipped classroom sessions, and understanding the students' backgrounds and standpoints).

Conclusion

We urge institutional agents to recognize the synergy between student development and retention theories when creating policies, practices, and programs designed to enhance student success. Whether operating from a perspective of facilitating student success toward meeting their own individual or community goals or meeting institutional objectives associated with time to degree and degree completion, student development and retention theories can support institutional agents in cultivating different forms of student success alongside students. We encourage practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to reflect on the following when considering a practice to improve student success:

> • Do all students have the knowledge and skills to participate in the practice or is it privileging students with financial or social capital?

> • Is the implementation oriented towards equity or is it metric centric?

> • Do all institutional agents understand both the positive and negative consequences of the practices on various student backgrounds (identities)?

Using both types of theories in concert challenges educators to question taken-for-

granted assumptions about the benefits of common practices in higher education used to enhance student success. Without keen attention to both student development and retention, programs can get enacted in ways that perpetuate inequities in higher education.

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