

Closing the Gaps: Guiding Students to Take Notice, Take Charge, and Graduate

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Abstract

College and university administrators continue to explore ways to decrease time to graduation and eliminate opportunity and achievement gaps among their students. The purpose of this study was to gather student perceptions of the availability and quality of academic resources on campus as a means to explore ways to improve graduation rates and decrease inequities. Undergraduate student focus groups provided qualitative data on student perceptions of helpful and less helpful campus resources. Students also shared lessons learned from experiences they gathered while navigating higher education. The study's findings are discussed and suggestions for developing a welcoming campus culture that promotes student success accountability, sense of belonging, and a seamless advising culture are offered.

Keywords: Student Success, Advising Practices, Sense of Belonging, Opportunity Gap, Campus Culture

Introduction

Equitable college completion rates among underrepresented and non-underrepresented students have improved but graduation gaps continue to pose challenges in higher education (Eberle-Sudre, Welch, & Nichols, 2015). While strides have been made towards college persistence, in some cases, the overall achievement gap remains. The graduation gap has widened for African American students in particular (Nichols, Eberle-Sudre, & Welch, 2016). This inequity can be attributed to a number of factors. First generation students who are often simultaneously learning how to survive and succeed in higher education need seamless support structures that don't require students to know exactly what help they need and when they need it in order to receive support (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, (2009). Underrepresented students also often need guidance with finding ways to become involved (Bergen-Cico, & Viscomi, 2013). Increasing completion rates and eliminating achievement gaps, require opportunity gaps and equity gaps to be acknowledged and addressed (Harper, 2015). This can be achieved in a number of ways. First, administrators must ensure that students acquire a sense of belonging on the campus by assuming responsibility for awareness of and engagement with students (Strayhorn, 2012). Next, campus advisors and student resource providers must ensure encompassing support by finding ways to collaboratively offer strategically aligned and seamless advising and services. Finally, administrators, advisors, and faculty alike must recognize the need for timely and proactive student advising and outreach through early alert initiatives (Jayaprakash, Moody, Lauria, Regan, & Baron, 2014).

Sense of Belonging

According to Strayhorn (2012, 2014) and Maslow (1943), “sense of belonging” is a basic human need. The concept of belonging is the perceived level of connectedness as a member of the campus community and culture. It is the feeling of social support and “that one is important to others, that one matters” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 31). Sense of belonging is an asset-based perspective held among engaged students about their individual importance to the campus culture (Quaye & Harper, 2014); it is relational and reciprocal. A solid sense of belonging is essential for academic success among marginalized groups. Faculty and administrators must be intentional in ensuring students feel acknowledged, respected, and involved within the campus culture (Arminio, Torres & Pope, 2012). This connection guides students towards having a successful academic experience and making progress towards degree completion.

Seamless Support

Seamless advising speaks to the importance of an alliance among campus resource providers, academic advisors, faculty, and staff in institutions of higher education as they guide students towards successful degree completion. These personalized interventions increase the frequency with which students receive help and may improve graduation and retention rates (Bosco, 2012; Capaldi, Lombardi, & Yellen, 2006).

Early Alert Advising

Proactive, student-centered communication between students, faculty, and academic advisers, is essential to the persistence and success of many struggling students. (Bergerson, Hotchkins, & Furse, 2014). Reasons for experiencing difficulty or being put at educational risk can vary from academic, social, financial or personal challenges (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). Early alert interventions usually include historical and real-time data, metrics,

and preemptive communications to prevent adverse and otherwise imminent consequences (Cai, Lewis, & Higdon, 2015). Early alert advising should be supportive, not punitive, and provide enough lead-time for corrective action, not irreversible consequences.

Methodology

Undergraduate students at a large, public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in southern California were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss their perceptions of the availability and quality of student resources on the campus. A faculty member from the Psychology and Sociology Department trained upper division psychology students to conduct student-led focus groups. Researchers conducted 13 student-led focus groups during spring of 2015. Most of the focus groups occurred during the students' "open" hour and lunch was provided. Each focus group lasted about 45 minutes. Sixty-six undergraduate students participated in the focus groups. Participants signed consent forms and were informed of the confidentiality of their individual input. Following the signing of consent forms, the researchers departed and the trained student facilitators presented guiding questions that asked about campus resource successes, barriers, and lessons learned.

The research team analyzed the transcribed results using LeCompte's Thematic Analysis (LeCompte, 2000). Several themes on student-perceived helpful and less helpful programs, forms, resources, advising, and lessons learned emerged from the focus groups. Barriers to completion and information that students wished they had access to earlier than they did in their academic careers were also discussed.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the responses to the guiding questions provided in the focus groups. Students held perceptions regarding a number of helpful campus resources including support programs, advising centers, and peer mentoring. They also had assertions about what considered hindrances and roadblocks.

Helpful Campus Resources

Participants were asked about their awareness of campus resources and their perceptions of those resources. Students acknowledged several support programs, for both general and targeted group access, as particularly helpful. They also found various advising options, particularly peer mentors, as helpful and even preferable.

Support Programs

Students believed many student-facing support programs had immediate and obvious benefit. Particularly, students mentioned the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), an access and equity support program for marginalized students. Students lauded the targeted support provided honors students and the advising support that is provided to students who arrive to campus without having a major declared. They appreciated the extra perks provided to students who participate in the Two- and Four-Year Pledge programs such as early registration and added advising, and the ongoing support offered by the various summer bridge programs.

Advising and Peer Mentors

Students in the focus groups appreciated having the new college-based advising centers available to them. Participants spoke favorably of academic support programs such as group

advising and peer mentors. Peer mentor resources are decentralized and often reside within various programs, colleges, and organizations. With regard to peer mentors, students whose college offered that type of resources responded favorably, while students whose college did not offer the option desired to have access to peer mentors. Students who served as peer mentors stated that they learned more about available campus resources once they became peer mentors than they knew at the time they needed those services themselves.

Participants also shared appreciation for the various self-support tools that were made available to them. Tools included interactive online roadmaps, up-to-date lists of course offerings for two years at a time, and more accurate degree progress reports (DPRs), which updates their classification, informs their standing, and determines their registration priority. Transfer students frequently touted an online tool specifically for them that helps them keep track of units taken and needed to successfully complete their program.

Less Helpful Campus Resources

Students shared perceptions of campus resources that they found less helpful than others. Lengthy orientation sessions, bureaucracy, and other barriers to completion were discussed. Participants regarded these often well-intended resources as hindrances to graduation that should be revisited and reconsidered.

Lengthy Orientation Sessions

There were some resources that administrators intended to be helpful that students considered less helpful than anticipated. Students often cited the required three-day orientation as too long, with too much information, and too rushed. Students also reported that the orientation groups were too large and they felt dissuaded from engaging with their new peer mentors or advisors during that time.

Bureaucracy

Some students provided anecdotes about being offered inconsistent information or different information from that of a peer in another college. Students reported having to visit several offices or campus locations to arrive at an answer or resolution. Participants also reported feelings of being burdensome when they visited some of the larger support offices on campus.

Barriers to Completion

A number of students voiced concerns about barriers to completion. Most concerns involved course offerings. Participants reported not being able to enroll in the courses that they needed because many of those courses were being taught on the same day or at the same time or not enough sections of the course were offered. Some courses were offered only once per year without being advertised as such. In other cases, students found courses that they expected would be offered were not offered because the department had not updated the two-year course offerings list. Students reported that these delays impacted their schedules significantly and postponed their original graduation date.

Lessons Learned

The topics that students most considered learned lessons were related to understanding how to create a balanced course roadmap for their program plans and expectations for advising.

Most students reported not understanding or realizing that not all courses in their plan of study are offered every term; some upper-division courses are offered once an academic year and so strategic planning for course enrollment is a must. Participants also stated that receiving reliable advising early in their college career to help build a balanced program roadmap that included built-in flexibility would have helped them avoid taking unneeded courses and better maximize the academic year. Many students confessed that they learned how to mix major and general elective courses to create a balanced schedule later than they would have liked and productive visits with an effective advisor could have helped with understanding that earlier. Students also realized that enrolling in only the minimum number of units necessary to receive financial aid inevitably delayed their degree completion.

Overall, students requested a central advising area for all majors where they can ask questions and receive clear, consistent advice about roadmap planning and preparing for graduation. Participants stated a need for easy to use guides and online tools for roadmap planning and reliable lists of two-year courses offerings so they can accurately plan and create realistic roadmaps for their college career. They also requested welcoming attitudes from advisors rather than feeling like a burden when requesting help at some of the larger resource centers.

Discussion and Suggestions

Promoting student success is the responsibility of all campus constituents (Arminio, Torres & Pope, 2012). Hansen (2014) asserts, “peers, faculty, advisors, staff, and administrators play a role in developing an institutional context that facilitates academic hope among students” (p. 18). It involves not only early advising interactions that are positive experiences for the students, but the results of those interactions must help students gain clarity in understanding how to navigate and be successful on the college campus. From an administrative perspective, this means creating a campus culture that is welcoming, accepting, and respectful (Strayhorn, 2012) and developing an advising culture that is ongoing and beneficial to students (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). Establishing these cultures are not easy tasks; campus leadership must resolve to be disrupters of what has always been and recognize and accept that the changes in customary practices are going to cause discomfort for some members of the campus community who are not ready for change (Arminio, Torres & Pope, 2012; Quaye & Harper, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012; Wheatley, 2005). Campus leadership must commit to instituting accountability, sense of belonging, and early alerts as integral parts of seamless advising to actively support student success.

Accountability

In order to establish student success accountability, campus leaders must determine up front what success means. This means setting goals early in the disruption process, ensuring the goals are measurable and systematically measured, and ensuring that those data are correlated to or representative of the intended goals. The data also needs to be revisited often and shared widely to gauge affect of the changes. These suggestions are in keeping with Andrade (2011), who offers that developing effective assessment systems promote accountability and transparency and help intuitions clarify purpose and re-evaluate goals.

Sense of Belonging

Developing a sense of belonging among students, particularly those who are marginalized requires commitment from administrators, faculty, and staff. Student engagement has a direct effect on retention (Bergen-Cico, & Viscomi, 2013) and the onus of student engagement rests on the institution (Quaye & Harper, 2014). Administrators must adopt techniques for providing faculty, and staff with tools to support diverse students while critically engaging majority populations (Harper, 2015). Helping students find their academic identities within the campus contributes to their sense of belonging (Bergerson, Hotchkins, Furse, 2014). These approaches will require open and honest dialog (Arminio, Torres & Pope, 2012; Quaye & Harper 2014), and attention to intentionality. Institutions with less diverse student populations must make strides towards implementing a culture of diversity inclusion (Wade-Golden, & Matlock, 2010; Zepeda, 2010). Discourse should include expectations of acceptance rather than tolerance, inclusion rather than assimilation, and respect rather than acclimation.

Early Alerts

Early alert advising is the process of identifying specific barriers to student success based on certain criteria, reaching out to students who meet those criteria, and providing support to assist students with addressing those challenges to change their trajectory. Early alerts offer opportunities for intervention and should be supportive and student-centered. Farnum, (n.d.) concurs and stresses that early alerts should not be portrayed as punitive or insurmountable.

According to the feedback received from the student focus groups, students on campus desired early alert outreach communications to help them stay on schedule towards graduation. Examples of institutionalized early alerts include informal email reminders to students who have not taken the first math course for their major by the end of their first year and notifications prior to registration when a required upper division course for their major is offered only once a year. All student communications also would include an invitation to make an appointment to meet with one of their advisors, along with contact information for their advisors, and a link to the campus-wide e-advising tool. To promote the success of early alert advising, administrators, faculty and staff should identify an accountable point of contact, provide clear steps for resolving the early alert issue, and create effective lines of communication among resources so students are not misdirected. This is in keeping with Farnum (n.d.) and Cai, Lewis, and Higdon (2015) who recommend multiple points of contact and support across divisions for early alert advising.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to learn more about student perceptions of the academic resources on campus in efforts to close opportunity gaps among student groups. The findings suggest that students respond best to the resources that are targeted to their needs and that offer continuity. Closing opportunity gaps among students on a college campus will involve deliberate efforts on the part of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Administrators can lead the charge of disrupting the status quo and implant new cultural norms by insisting on accountability among campus teams; fostering a campus-wide sense of belonging for marginalized students; and promoting effective seamless advising that includes, support programs, advising and peer-mentoring, and student-centered early alerts.

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