Chapter 4

The Role of Values, Beliefs, and Culture in Student Retention and Success

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ABSTRACT

Culture is comprised of a shared set of values and beliefs, and is known to contribute to organizational success. But how do these factors contribute to individual success within the framework of academia? The purpose of this chapter is to better understand the intersection of values, beliefs, and culture within the area of student retention and success in higher education. As both universities and colleges struggle to identify aspects to increase graduation completion rates in various environments, it is essential to examine the most basic factors that often contribute significantly to this area. This chapter defines individual values and beliefs, the development of shared values, beliefs and culture, the impact of each, and the role of each within the larger topic of student retention and success.

INTRODUCTION

We understand the goal of most colleges and universities to be the successful academic completion of the degree a student may be pursuing. But this simple concept has many facets. In order for a student to successfully complete his or her academic interest, they must persist through the challenges a college experience may offer. For some, this may mean challenges with early adulthood, responsibility, determining one’s own self, growing in community with others, or understanding questions and self-doubt that may occur. For others, the challenges may come in a more mature form including balancing work and family, with their academics as well as financial and health issues.

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Student retention is often discussed as a comparison between these two groups, first-time degree-seeking students and “returning students”. Returning students are identified as having spent at least one semester out of school for any number of reasons including personal issues and those related to the institution or college experience. Student retention and success factors are most often tracked using the initial group, first-time degree-seeking students, as it is most desirable for institutions to see them start and finish their degree program within the traditional four-year timeframe.

What compels first-time students to successfully complete their programs? The study of retention factors within this group in recent years is increasing. Various elements have been examined. As Dumbrigue, Moxley & Najor-Durack explain: “retention is a complex personal, social, and academic enterprise. It requires an institutional-community-personal partnership. This partnership links students to proactive support systems” before disruption occurs (2001, p. 12). There are many contributing aspects to student success, which occur at personal and organizational levels, and are deeply rooted in the very essence of the student and the student experience. This chapter seeks to delve into the essential elements of retention, including the individual components of values and beliefs, and the broader institutional concept of culture.

**FACTORS OF RETENTION: VALUES, BELIEFS, AND CULTURE**

As previously discussed, underlying foundational elements must be present in order for students to persist within their degree programs. These elements include personally held values and beliefs, as well as the development of shared culture. The individual factors of values and beliefs contribute to both the connection and the identification of students with the institution. Meanwhile, the university’s culture impacts students on a continuous basis.

To best understand exactly what culture is and how it might contribute to both student retention and success, we must first consider the various definitions of the term. Culture has been defined by many, often from varying perspectives, from psychology to sociology to anthropology. Western society has attempted to define culture from the ethic or minority viewpoint in order to better understand the multicultural world in which we now exist. But as Mantovani (2000) revealed, understanding culture is a “universal problem” (p. 1). For our purposes within this chapter, culture will be considered as the set of shared assumptions, which produce understanding and behavior, resulting in the very identity or essence of the group, including an organization.

The realization that culture is the compilation of several contributing factors including an individual’s values and beliefs; and then demonstrated within the framework of norms, artifacts and behavior within a group, provides a deeper understanding of the structure that exists (Hogan & Coote, 2013; Homburg & Pflesser, 2000; Schein, 2010). Culture is known to have a profound impact upon and within a group, whether it be a small independent group or a large complex organization such as an academic institution. Group success has been directly tied to the existing culture. Notably, the concept of “individual-fit” within the culture has become increasingly important and therefore, studied, with respect to retention.

As the study of culture becomes more prominent within several environments including our general society, organizational systems, and within the educational realm, there is greater awareness to the complexity of its structure. As Schein (2010) theorized, culture is a multi-dimensional entity with many layers. It is now understood that culture begins with individual values and beliefs, often those of the leader of the group or the organization, and then manifests itself within the developed norms and behaviors of those within the group. Finally, it is expressed in the ceremonies, rituals, and artifacts the