

Residential Learning Communities on Historically Black College and University Campuses

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ABSTRACT

Success for minority students in higher education has become a critical issue in higher education academia. Strategies for minority student retention have been developed as a result of the utilization of organizational theories and models which identify factors that influence student attrition in higher education. In particular, Tinto's attrition models (1975) and (1993) are among those theories that have been used in an attempt to describe and categorize the student attrition process. In an attempt to retain minority students', administrators in higher education must comprehend fully the significance of these models within the organizational culture and the academic environment in relation to student retention and attrition. The purpose of this article is to seek the denotative definition of a learning community and their successes in retaining minority students.

Introduction

In reviewing the literature regarding minority student retention and residential learning communities, it was determined that a residential academic setting is the most successful strategy of the attrition process. In an attempt to retain minority students' and build student attrition numbers, administrators in higher education must comprehend fully the significance of these models within the academic environment and make necessary improvements in relation to student retention. By utilizing organizational models such as Tinto's attrition models (1975) and (1993), college and university administrators will seek a denotative definition of a residential learning community and will possess the ability to establish a learning community on their campus in their approaches to retaining minority students.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to seek the denotative definition of a learning community and their successes in retaining minority students. In order to face the challenges of minority student retention a pilot residential learning community must be developed in order to increase student attrition. The residential learning community will be designed to serve an initial group of fifty undergraduates. The program will grow in annual increments of fifty to one hundred, to a full complement of one thousand over ten years.

The Problem

Students on historically black college and university campuses will exemplify student satisfaction and high academic achievement if they participate in a residential learning community during their freshman year. The program will serve good to excellent students who wish to pursue their studies in a small residential academic setting. These students must exemplify a desire to obtain regular counseling, master skills in critical thinking, develop a commitment to learning, possess a tolerance for ambiguity, possess an ability to transfer competence, intercultural facility, personal and ethical integrity, and an ability to work as a team.

Background of the Problem

The authors Swail, W.S., Redd, K.E., & Perna, L.W. (2003) provide a depiction of factors that affect the student retention process. Education has a profound impact on both the individual and society. Individuals with a bachelor's degree earn, on average, twice that of high school graduates and those with a professional degree earn twice what individuals with a bachelor's. The authors identify that the level of academic preparation in high school is positively related to college entrance examination scores, predisposition toward college, college enrollment, college persistence rates, and college completion rates. Completing a rigorous curricular program during high school appears to be a more

important predictor of college persistence than test scores, particularly for African American and Hispanic students. The annual college enrollment rates have generally increased among high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 for Blacks, Hispanics, and Caucasian students since the late 1990s. However, only 46% of African Americans and 47% of Hispanics who first enrolled in a four-year institution with the goal of completing a bachelor's degree, actually completed a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to the 67% of Caucasians and 72% of Asians. Six-year bachelor's degree completion rates are also lower for African Americans and Hispanics than for Caucasians and Asians. As a result of low retention rates among African American and Hispanic students' on historically black college and university campuses administrators are seeking strategies for minority student retention (Sissoko & Shiau, 2005).

Significance of Residential Learning Communities

To meet the needs of first-time freshman students and ensure student retention, a residential learning community must be established in order to develop the beginning relationships between the students and the faculty. The authors McLeod & Young (2005) believe that there is a substantial population of first time undergraduate students whose academic success and ultimate retention can be significantly enhanced if they participate in a residential, interdisciplinary, outcomes based academic community distinguished by its emphasis on intensive mentoring and peer support. Unlike an honors program that serves exceptional students, or a remedial program that addresses significant deficiencies, a residential learning community will address the needs of the freshman student population and establish a bond that ensures student satisfaction and high academic achievement. The development of any program at any university requires a multifaceted process incorporating all campus officials, including administration, faculty, staff, community, and especially students. Leadership and faculty ownership are key variables in a successful retention program, and the message communicated from top management is critical to the support of the campus staff.

Implementation of Residential Learning Communities

The authors Johnson and Romanoff (1999) provide strategies that can be utilized to implement residential learning community programs. Senior campus leadership must play two important roles in the development of residential learning communities. The first role is to monitor institutional progress toward clearly stated campus retention goals. The second role is to coordinate and lead all stakeholders, students, parents, other campus administrators, faculty, and staff toward stated goals. The development of a residential, interdisciplinary, outcomes based academic community requires supportive leadership, the willingness to evoke change on campus, and a careful planning effort (Morest & Karp, 2005). If any of these factors are missing, the chances for success are limited. Ultimate success of a student retention effort depends on the unequivocal support and the involvement of the entire campus in shaping program operations, and the important practice of keeping ideology focused on the student.

Success of Residential Learning Communities

The success of a residential learning community will be determined by the outcomes of student achievement and student satisfaction within their collegiate experiences from those participants in the residential learning community. Educational stability, student satisfaction and student achievement are the building blocks of the retention process. According to the studies of Alexander Meiklejohn (1932) a residential learning community offers a deliberately restructured curriculum to meet the educational objectives of a specific cohort of students and their faculty. The author also notes the curricular structure of the learning community as a mitigating influence upon further fragmentation of curriculum and community within the institution.

According to Gabelnick, McGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990), modern learning communities attempt to remove structural barriers endemic to many colleges and universities that often impede effective teaching and learning and minority student retention. Removal of such barriers has evolved through the utilization of organization models, some of which serve exclusively first-year students and emphasize the collaboration of freshmen interest groups (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo, 1993). Some of these models often include student-faculty interaction and interdisciplinary linkage enhanced through active classroom learning (Levine and Tompkins, 1996).

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this article was to seek the denotative definition of a learning community and their successes in retaining minority students. Success for minority students in higher education is a critical issue within higher education academia. Strategies for minority student retention have been developed as a result of the utilization of organizational theories and models which identify factors that influence student attrition in higher education. In particular, Tinto's attrition model (1975) and (1993) are among those theories that have been used in an attempt to describe and categorize the student attrition process. In an attempt to retain minority students', administrators in higher education must comprehend fully the significance of these models within the organizational culture and the academic environment in relation to student retention and attrition.

In conclusion, administrators in higher education should embrace an understanding of strategies for minority student retention. Administrators must be equipped to face the challenges of minority student retention and be proactive in their approaches retain minority students. A students' ability to be connected to the institutional environment and their ability to adapt to the organizational culture are related to vocational and educational stability, student satisfaction, and student success. The institutional environment and the organizational culture mediate student academic and social experiences in college. Educational stability, student satisfaction, and student success are the building blocks of the retention process.

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