A Pastoral Approach to Student Retention in a Higher Education Institution in the Caribbean

Dr. Mark A. Minott
Faculty of Education
University College of the Cayman Islands
September 18th 2007
mminott@ucci.edu.ky

Abstract
Using selected research reports, personal correspondence with students and, my experience as a higher education administrator of a College in a Caribbean small islands state, I reflexively display the usefulness of a pastoral approach to student retention. Difficulties of employing the approach are also explored.

Introduction

There seems to a growing research knowledge base in the area of student retention, student drop out rate and the general welfare of students. The literature clearly points to a seeming successful attempt by institutions to support students in, and during their study. See for example, Hughes, Denholm, McCann and Elliot (2005) and Fischer (2007).

However, while there is a focus in the existing literature on strategies to aid, retain and support students engaging in various Universities and programmes, the experiences of the care givers (persons responsible for administrating and implementing student retention policies), the nature of the approach they employ, relationship with students and, how they actually carry out their tasks in affecting the desired change, is noticeably few. The writings of

Fischer (2007) and Bioss (2006) are among those which give the student a 'voice' as well as provide some evidence of a focus on the caregiver. In other words, practitioners' reflexivity seems to be a largely over-looked dimension of the growing literature on student retention and student 'drop out'.

In light of this observation the aim of this paper is two-fold: One, to add to the literature on this seemingly over- looked dimension of the process of student retention. To achieve this, my personal experiences as a higher education administrator engaged in student retention is weaved in throughout the paper, along with examples of personal communications with students. Two, to highlight the usefulness of a pastoral approach to the process of student retention, this is done by defining relevant terms and phrases and by carrying out a succinct discussion of the approach. I end the paper by pointing out a few difficulties involved with implementing the pastoral approach model. Essentially, this paper is about professional practice, but with a reflexive slant.

What is a Pastoral Approach?

Student retention is usefully defined by Hughes, Denholm, McCann and Elliot (2005) as the "completion of a course of study irrespective of success in all, or any, of the associated assessment, or of progression to any subsequent year or further course of study". I can infer from this statement that, essentially, the aim is to keep students on a particular course.

It is my opinion that how this aim is achieved, and the processes employed by an institution or individual with this responsibility in achieving it, is

driven by a particular approach or way of thinking about the process. It is that way or thinking about the aim that colours how it is achieved and the spirit and ethos in which policies to achieve it are implemented. In some institutions, the thinking that drives this aim is that of student diversity, widening participation and multi-culturalism however, the approach used by the institution for which I worked, and that which I have personalised is one of a pastoral nature.

The word 'pastoral' is associated with the clergy, and it is that which influences my thinking. Embedded in this notion is the idea of care giving and concern for students. A pastoral approach involves two elements, the mechanics of 'care giving' and the 'affective of care giving'. The 'mechanics of care giving' include a simple action such as a prompt reply to students' email and queries or not being too busy to properly attend and give time to a student telephone call. These simple actions are indicators of a genuine interest in students' well-being. By well-being, I mean their sense of comfort or security.

The 'mechanics of care giving' is as important as the 'affective of care giving'. The 'affective of care giving' involves employing practices that impact positively, the student's mental and emotional state, for example, giving an encouraging word and or praising.

Impacting students mentally and emotionally do occur, for I have found that there are many times when, adult students would say, that they felt good and were motivated to continue working towards the completion of their degree because during casual meetings and tutorials, I used phrases such as "you are doing a good job, keep working, you are making good strides in your work". Most

times, this feeling of well-being seems to be revealed on their faces, as they leave my office with a smile.

Based on this observation, I am of the opinion that while the 'affective of care giving' is not always quantifiable (if at all this is possible) it seems to aid in stimulating students' emotional well being which could contribute to student retention. Why is this statement plausible? It is reasonable because, when students feel appreciated and cared for by the staff in an institution, the feeling could lead to the development of a degree of loyalty and interest in the institution and programme of study, which, could subsequently lead to them being retained or staying with the programme to completion. This thought can be supported by the writing of (Fischer, 2007). I will expand on this idea in the next section of this paper under the heading on the usefulness of the approach to students' retention.

So what exactly is a pastoral approach to student retention? In my opinion, it involves employing the 'mechanics of care giving' such as (but not limited to) a prompt reply to students' email and queries as well as the affective of care giving, which includes engaging in a pattern of behaviour that focuses on impacting positively the emotional and mental state of students.

How useful is a pastoral approach in the process of student retention?

Given the definition I have provided in the foregoing discussion, it logically follows that a pastoral approach is not a tool for solving all problems associated with student retention. For example, resolving students' need for financial

resources. However, it is primarily useful in the affective aspects of the process of student retention.

Specifically, a pastoral approach to student retention aims to encourage in students, healthy and stable emotional and mental states, which could then enable them to address militating factors which act as barriers to achieving their desired qualification. Factors such as: personal financial circumstance, social problems, medical conditions, changing circumstances and inadequate decision making (Davis, 2003).

For example, I am reminded of the student who came to my office to inform me that the cancer that was in remission for a number of years had returned. By open communication, and spending time to listen to that student's concern, providing a prompt reply and response to her concerns, keeping her informed of development in the institutions while she underwent treatment, this young lady is now well on her way to completing and achieving her desired qualification, in spite of her illness. At a meeting with the University's chief administrative officer, she was very open about the support received, and how this as aided her in the process and progress of her studies. That student sent me the following correspondent.

Greetings M.

Hope all is well with you. Thank you for your time and attention to the details of my records and also making the appropriate changes … I am grateful for your help with this. Many thanks for your thoughts and prayers which truly help me get through the most difficult days and the not so difficult days of chemo and

radiation. Am almost half way finished the treatments. Bravo!!! Have a superb day and God bless you (Personal Communication, May 2007).

A pastoral approach to student retention places students at the center and recognises them as their own problem-solvers, and this benefits the institution, for when this happens, it aids in reducing the demands on the institution's resources.

Guarino, Santibanez and Daley (2006) study of teacher recruitment and retention throughout the United States of America found that a number of working conditions were related to success in recruitment and retention. The conditions they listed that are relevant to this discussion are; administrative support, induction programmes, mentoring and level of autonomy. Further analysis of these listed conditions reveals that, they all relate to the care, support and well- being of the student. In other words, the areas can be summarized as having to do with the 'affective'.

A study carried out by the website duck9.com entitled, statistics on College student drop out rates, shows that 38 % of their respondents cites financial pressure as the main reason why they drop out of college, 5% cites health problems, 3% cites mental and emotional issues, 9% cites family support, 13% cites poor social fit and 28 % cites academic disqualification.

While financial pressures is the main reason identified by respondents as a cause for student drop out, taken together, 58% cites aspects of the 'affective' as cause for student drop out. This means collectively, the 'affective' rank higher than the financial in percentage, and as a factor causing student drop out.

From these studies, I could infer that the affective aspects of a student's life and how these are addressed influence retention. Even academic disqualification, such as, not maintaining a good grade point average is connected to the affective. For one could argue that if the student is able, and has been disqualified, most times the non maintenance of a good grade point average can be linked to affective matters such as a lack of motivation, family issues and issues of personal relationships.

From personal experience I have come to appreciate the fact that addressing the affective needs of students contributed to the reduction in drop out rate, thus aiding in the retention process in the institution of which I was a part.

After the departure of my predecessor, there was a 60% drop out rate among students, however, by engaging the 'mechanics and affective of care giving' which includes administrative support, such as calling students to discuss the reason/s they had stopped attending classes, making their academic records available to them, ensuring that these records were kept updated and accessible, responding promptly to their queries and arranging personalised fee payment plans, the number of active students increased to 51% at the time of writing this paper and as remained so.

While one could argue that there are a number of factors that could lead to this increase, and I while I would be inclined to agree, I cannot dismiss the probability that the application of a pastoral approach which focuses on students'

affective needs, did contribute to the increase. Or at the very least, it was a factor worthy of consideration.

Anderson-Rowland (2007) in her study on student recruitment and retention in engineering highlights three primary reasons why under graduate students withdrew from the university. Featured prominently on the list are employment demands and family problems.

These areas are typical concerns for adult students for whom I had been responsible. For example I remember the student who was suddenly saddled with the task of caring for aging parents and how she struggled to balance this with the demands of her study and regular work, or the student who came to my office with tear stained face and a look of forlorn, because her husband had left and had filed for a divorce. A pastoral approach, that is, showing them that I cared, listening and responding to their queries, giving a word of comfort, was not just appropriate, but significant to the continuation of such students in their chosen programme of study.

Students do respond positively and are appreciative of a pastoral approach which focuses on encouraging their emotional and mental well being. One male student wrote,

Dr. M

*I really appreciate the diligent assistance that you have given to me and the other students as we made an effort to come back into focus [after the hurricane]. I wish you well in your further assignment and pray God's continued blessings (*Personal Communication, April 2007a).

And another wrote,

Dear Dr. M.

Thanks so much for forwarding the official copy of my grades. May I take this opportunity to thank you most sincerely for all the assistance you rendered to me during my course. Though your absence will be sorely missed by [our institution], [we are] nonetheless fortunate in that your expertise will remain within these Islands. May God richly bless you in all your undertakings. With kind regards, (Personal Communication, April 2007b).

In these examples, I deliberately highlighted fact that these students were males, and for two reasons; one, because the personal references used so far were from my engagement with female students. And two, the examples point out that, a pastoral approach to student retention is helpful to both genders.

The conclusion reached by Ariwa (2001) in a study evaluating the effectiveness of a pastoral care and relevant support mechanism in the University of North London was that pastoral support added value to the entire performance of students, as student grade showed remarkable improvement as a result of the pastoral care they received. This conclusion once again points to the usefulness of a pastoral approach in addressing students' needs and in encouraging students' performance.

The foregoing discussion defines a pastoral approach in relation to student retention and succinctly displayed its usefulness in the retention process however; there are difficulties implementing this approach.

Difficulties in implementing the Approach

While I am advocating the usefulness of this approach to student retention in higher education, I am an aware that its implementation is not an easy task for the leadership of higher education, for there are issues in need of clarification before this can be a reality in many institutions, especially those with limited resources. Arguably, a pastoral approach requires 'time' which is in short supply for lecturers and higher education administrators equally.

In reality, carrying out the mechanics such as calling students, keeping them informed of developments within the institution cannot be detached from the fact that this is time consuming. Additionally, the time required for this approach coupled with other factors, such as less than ideal salaries, less than adequate working conditions, personal convenience, or personal choice, may cause administrators to restrict themselves and focus solely on the administration of the institution and delivering curricula and exclude the affective needs of the students thus jeopardizing the student retention process.

Another difficulty with the approach is that, it seems to be more effective when employed by individuals with a friendly disposition or at least those who are able to cultivate this disposition through learning. This suggests the need to carefully choose staff for the area of recruitment and retention.

The work of Becker and Riel (2000) brings into sharper focus another difficulty with the approach. They introduce the idea of how teachers' and by extension, higher education administrators define their role. I will extend Becker and Reil's thought to include the fact that the way higher education

administrators and lecturers define their professional role is also likely to influence the degree to which they embrace and engage with the model of a pastoral approach to student retention.

It also seems that the degree to which higher education administrators and lecturers embraced their role as 'caregivers' is also a personal matter. My present and personal position is that higher education institutions should be involved in, and concerned with, developing the whole person of the student, as postulated by Panton (1956), and a pastoral approach is a viable option in achieving this aim.

Summary

So how useful is a pastoral approach to student retention? The usefulness of the approach can be seen in the fact that it targets the emotional and mental state of the student. Its primary aim is to encourage and help to maintain the health and stability of the students, emotionally and mentally and this is achieved by care-givers employing both the mechanics and the affective of care giving. A stable and healthy emotional and mental state, will then aid in enabling students to address efficiently, militating factors.

Reference

Anderson- Rowland Mary R (2007) A First Year Engineering Student Survey to Assist Recruitment and Retention
http://fie.engrng.pitt.edu/fie96/papers/182.pdf
(Accessed April 30th, 2007)

Becker Henry Jay and Riel Margaret M. (2000) Teacher professional

engagement and constructivist-compatible computer use, Teaching, learning, and computing: 1998 National survey Report #7 center for Research on Information technology and organisations University of California, Irvine and University of Minnesota USA
http://www.crito.uci.edu/tlc/findings/special_report2/start-page.htm
(September 8, 2005)

Boss Charlie (2006) Why so many state school pupils drop out of Oxbridge. (the political game play behind high number of university dropouts in UK). *Spectator* (Dec 2, 2006): p NA.

Davis Margaret (2003) Barriers to Reflective Practice: the Changing Nature of Higher Education Active Learning in Higher Education 4, 243

Duck 9 (2007) http://www.duck9.com/College-Student-Drop-Out-Rates.htm (Accessed May 1st 2007)

Fischer Karin (2007) A Historically Black College Takes a Hands-on Approach to Student Success. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, 29 (March 23, 2007): p NA.

Guarino Cassandra A, Santibanez Lucrecia and Daley Glenn A (2006) Teacher Recruitment and Retention: A Review of the Recent Empirical Literature. Review of Educational Research Summer, 76 (2), 173-208

Henry Ricardo (2007) Personal communication by email Friday 13th 2007(a)

Hughes Ann, Denholm Jane W, McCann John, and Elliot Dely (2005) Current Research on Retention and Achievement- A Review of the Scottish Further Education Council. www.sfeu.ac.uk/documents/3064/ (Accessed May 10, 2007)

Hunter Jane (2007) Personal Communication May 11th 2007

Panton J.H (1956) Modern teaching Practice and technique Great Britain University press Aberdeen

Pierson Linford (2007) personal communication by email Friday 13th 2007(b)