A First-Place Finish: The Use of Awards and Competition in Re-energizing Your Retention Efforts

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Abstract - According to the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (2010), the overall state average retention rate for fall 2009 was 65% for all institutions and 54% for two-year colleges in, particular. Trenholm State has a retention rate of 51% percent. Since 2002, the College's retention rate has increased from 37 to 51% percent as a result of its retention initiative. Throughout this eight-year process, it has been important to implement strategies for maintaining the momentum in retention.

      Several strategies were used to influence employees' commitment to retention initiatives, such as the Iron Grip Awards, modeled after the Oscars of the Academy Awards. The Iron Grip Ceremony was designed to recognize leaders in retention at the College. Several categories of awards were presented, such as *The Superior Retainer Award*, *The Great Strides Awards*, *The Champion of Students Faculty Award*, *The Champion of Students Staff Award* and *The Keeper of the Students Award*. Another strategy employed was the use of competition during the college-wide Noel-Levitz Connections Now: Customer Service web-based training. Teams were randomly created to compete for various prizes. Both of these strategies created a positive retention culture.

Introduction

Education accountability and student success are measured by a myriad of student outcomes, one of which is retention. As the United States continues to compete in a global economy, an educated workforce is vital to its success. President Barack Obama (2009) has committed the nation's resources to this end, as described in the American Graduation Initiative:

> Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy. It's time to reform our community colleges so that they provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future. (Obama, 2009, p. 1)

This initiative calls for an additional five million community college graduates by 2020 to enable America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. The community college system created 50 years ago by President Harry Truman has met the challenge to provide education to America's workforce with affordability, flexible course schedules, and customized training, using an efficiency platform. This new challenge issued by President Obama will help rebuild the capacity and competitiveness of America's workforce for a global economy.

      According to Lederman (2009), higher education policy experts' concern has shifted from access to student success. Although this paradigm shift has occurred with more emphasis on retention initiatives nationwide, the data from a longitudinal study released by ACT, Inc. (2009) does not support this phenomenon quantitatively with retention rates of first-year students who returned their sophomore years decreasing to 65.7% (2007-08) from 68.1% in 2006-07. It is interesting that community colleges saw

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their overall retention rate rise to 53.7% in 2007-08, which is comparative to what is occurring in Alabama's community colleges (54%).

Statement of the Problem

Faced with accountability mandates from stake holders, government entities, and accrediting bodies, colleges must establish strategies to enhance the engagement of educators in facilitating various initiatives to influence student outcomes, such as retention. Consequently, organizational culture may have a profound influence on retention at a postsecondary institution (Johnson, 2008).

As previously discussed, theorists have been ambiguous about defining organizational culture (McAleese & Hargie, 2004); however, they all agree that culture can aid or hinder the effectiveness of an organization (Brown, 1992; Denison, 1990; Lee, 2004; Schein, 1985). Kilgore (1997) contended, "When culture is ignored, the change process results in no change at all" (p. 1). Therefore, ensuring positive organizational culture prior to implementing new initiatives is critical to success. This is considered the necessary first step to ensure that resulting strategies do not become adversarial to the organization's culture (Nelson, 2000; Redding & Catalanello, 1994; Rowley & Sherman, 2001).

> Schein (1985), a leading organizational culture theorist, described culture in the following way: Organizational culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration — that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 9)

Other authors (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Connor, Lake, & Stackman, 2003; Deal & Kennedy, 1999; Denison, 1990; Dhillon, 2001; John Hoyle, personal communication, April 1, 2003; Lahiry, 1994; Oden, 1999; Owens, 2001) have defined culture as an intrinsic belief system that transcends organizational behaviors. That is, "Culture is who we are and how we do things around here" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 4), which is postulated by others (Birnbaum, 1998; Bower, 1996; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Louison, 2004; Malinconico, 1984). Potter (2003) defined organizational culture as the "values, beliefs and norms expressed in actual practices and behaviors of the organization's members" (p. 14). Culture is the driving force for organizational success or effectiveness, and it dictates or embodies the values of the organization (Brown, 1992; Deal & Kennedy; Denison, 1990; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Potter). Hall and Hord (2001) defined culture as "the individually and socially constructed values, norms, and beliefs about an organization and how it should behave that can be measured only by observation of the setting using qualitative methods" (p. 194). According to Wheelan (1994), "Each organization has a collective identity, members, goals and tasks, a schedule, a structure in which to accomplish its work, a territory, norms, division of labor, a shared history, and the like" (p. 134). Connor, Lake, and Stackman (2003) described two important functions of culture in organizations: (a) to solidify members and demonstrate how to relate to each other and (b) to enable the organization to adapt to the external environment.

The retention initiatives implemented at Trenholm State were effective; however, it was necessary to develop strategies to re-energize employees and create a positive *retention culture*. Consequently, efforts were made to create a paradigm shift of the College's retention culture to focus on building relationships with students in order to aid student success.

It is important to note the historical perspective of Patterson and Trenholm State Technical Colleges and their subsequent merger to become H. Councill Trenholm State Technical College. As a result of the merger, the College's culture was influenced. Thus, understanding the culture of the newly merged Trenholm State is pivotal to the underlying need to create a positive retention culture at the College.

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A Historical Perspective: Patterson and Trenholm

As previously discussed (Johnson, 2008), *Patterson State Technical College* was established in 1947 through the Regional Vocational and Trade Schools Act 673 by the Alabama State Legislature (Act 673, 1948). The school opened on September 4, 1962, and enrolled 162 students (College Catalog, 2007-2008). The Alabama State Legislature authorized *Trenholm State Technical College* on May 3, 1963, approximately 16 years after *Patterson Tech*. With an initial enrollment of 275 students, classes began at *Patterson Tech* on August 15, 1966 (College Catalog).

The present *Trenholm State* was formed in 2001 through the consolidation of *Patterson Tech* with *Trenholm Tech*, which were located approximately nine miles apart. The two colleges had a history of providing overlapping services for the same geographical area. In compliance with the 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* (347 U.S. 483) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, courses were aligned in 1970 to eliminate program duplication. In response to these decisions, program offerings as well as personnel were shifted between the schools (College Catalog, 2007-2008). Currently, the College offers 34 programs in a variety of career and technical fields. *Trenholm State* is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the Council on Occupational Education to award certificates and associate degrees (*College Catalog*).

Alabama is the home to the First White House of the Confederacy (First White House of the Confederacy, May 25, 2010) and is the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement, which was a nonviolent struggle to engage full civil rights and equality under the law for Blacks in the United States (Civil Rights Movement, 2010; American Civil Rights Movement, 2010). Alabama, a state steeped in history, celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 2005, which set the tone for the Civil Rights Movement (Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce, 2010). These historical facts highlight the cultural tensions of segregation and integration. Fifty-five years after the Civil Rights Movement, *Trenholm State* is struggling to reconcile its racial differences after a tumultuous merger in 2001.

Alabama has a history of vestiges of *de jure* segregation related to public higher education for Blacks, as documented in *Knight v. State of Alabama* (1994). Prior to Reconstruction, Blacks were denied all access to postsecondary public higher education in Alabama for the sole purpose of ensuring inferiority of Blacks to Whites in social, economic, and political aspects (*Knight v. State of Alabama*). Following Reconstruction, the *separate but equal* doctrine and *Jim Crowism* were followed when the provision for public higher education was made for Blacks in Alabama (The History of Jim Crow, May 25, 2010). The institutions of higher learning provided for Black students were inferior in curriculum, infrastructure, and other resources when compared to the universities attended by their White counterparts. The 1960s brought the admission of Black students to White four-year institutions in Alabama, as a result of a federal court order; however, even with the integration of traditionally White institutions, many Black students still choose to attend historically Black institutions (*Knight v. State of Alabama*).

Retention at Trenholm State

Approximately one year after the merger in 2001, Trenholm State's retention rate was 37%, which was well below the national average. The College's administration determined that it was imperative for the College to implement a retention initiative with the primary goal of increasing Trenholm State's retention rate by three percent annually. Over the past eight years, several strategies have been used to reduce attrition and increase retention as the College struggled to address various issues as a result of the merger. According to the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (2010), the fall 2009 retention rate at Trenholm State is 51 percent, which reflects an overall increase of 38%.

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Retention at Trenholm State has faced a myriad of challenges. As a two-year technical college its mission is primarily one of work force development; more specifically, providing short term training to get students to work.

Throughout this eight-year process, it has been important to implement strategies for maintaining the momentum in retention initiatives among the employees at Trenholm State. The retention initiative at Trenholm State, funded by a Title III-B grant, has three objectives: (1) To increase the retention rate by three percent annually, (2) To increase the enrollment of high school graduates by two percent annually, and (3) To provide professional development as it relates to retention for at least 50 percent of the faculty and staff. Consequently, the College has implemented several activities to accomplish these objectives, such as, (1) hiring a student activities staff assistant whose focus is to develop and coordinate student activities to foster affinity among students for Trenholm State, (2) implementation of the Retention Management System (Noel-Levitz) which identifies students who possess high risk characteristics that may influence them to withdraw from the College, (3) establishment of a Retention Team that meets approximately 6 times annually to discuss retention issues and plan retention activities, (4) hosted an ad hoc student focus group to discuss impediments to student success, (5) established the Student Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) Academy, (6) administered student satisfaction surveys, such as the ACT Student Opinion Survey annually, (7) hired a job placement coordinator to assist students in finding employment during matriculation and upon graduation from Trenholm State, and (8) provided professional development training to full-time employees to include sessions on organizational efficiency and effectiveness using Six Sigma techniques, successful strategies for student retention, enhancing customer service, intentional intrusive student advising, and enhancing instructional delivery. Two of the most effective strategies employed at Trenholm State to enhance the retention momentum among employees were the Iron Grip Ceremony and the Customer Service Competition.

Iron Grip Ceremony

The Iron Grip Awards Ceremony was modeled after the Oscars of the Academy Awards. It was designed to recognize leaders in retention at Trenholm State. The ceremony was held during a college-wide meeting attended by all full-time faculty and staff. Using a Microsoft Power Point presentation, presenters introduced the nominees for each award. The winner was announced by the presenter, who received an envelope with the recipient's name.

Special recognition was given to two security guards who received honorable mention certificates for excellent customer service rendered to students and staff during the execution of their duties. For example, one recipient develops relationships with the students and aids the students in obtaining solutions to various impediments to success such as, addressing sensitive faculty-related challenges.

Several categories of awards were presented, such as the ***Superior Retainer Award***, which was given to programs that had a retention rate higher than the college average of 51%. This award was created to foster a climate of success among college faculty and recognize those programs who had demonstrated student success strategies for retaining students. These programs notable contributed to Trenholm State's increase it is overall retention rate. These programs included accounting, automotive collision, automotive service, automotive manufacturing, culinary arts, early care, emergency medical services, industrial electronics, massage therapy, and truck driving, with each program receiving a certificate of recognition.

Nominees for ***The Great Strides Awards*** were early care, automotive service, industrial electronics, and drafting and design with early care receiving the award for the program with the most improved retention rate over the previous year. It was important to recognize those programs who had made significant improvement of their retention rates.

One of the distinguished awards presented was for ***The Champion of Students Faculty Award***. The award was given to the faculty member who demonstrated passion and zeal for building relationships with students to aid in their success. Its nominees were from math, licensed practical nursing, and automotive collision. The instructor from the math department was presented with the Iron Grip Award, which was a trophy with an eagle. The eagle represented the ability to soar to new heights in retention.

The recipient of this award thoroughly embraced the College's Early Alert system and identified students who were having difficulty in her classes. By using the Early Alert system, the student would be contacted to implemented needed interventions, such as tutoring or financial aid. Additionally, she offered tutoring and served voluntarily as an instructor for Orientation 101.

Not to exclude a group at the College, an award was also given to recognize the accomplishments of staff at the College, *The Champion of Students Staff award*. The nominees for this prestigious award were from the following departments: learning enhancement center, financial aid, emergency medical technician and maintenance, with the director of financial aid, receiving the Iron Grip Award. For the Champion of Students Faculty and Staff awards nominees were made by the College's President's Cabinet. The recipient of this award consistently sought methods to provide Federal and State financial aid and other avenues to assist students in funding their education. She serves on the College's scholarship and the Trenholm Foundation Scholarship committees. Further, she was a co-author for a $20,000 grant to provide financial aid education to prospective and current students.

The final award category was *The Keeper of the Students Award,* which was given to the program with the highest retention rate at the College. Nominees for this award were early care, automotive manufacturing, truck driving, and industrial electronics, with the Iron Grip award going to truck driving with a retention rate of 91.67%. The Truck Driving program at Trenholm State is very close knit. One of the instructors in this program using a instructional delivery peer-coaching technique to aid student success. This program also has a 100% passing rate on the licensure exam and a 94.23 percent placement rate.

Customer Service Competition

Customer service is one of the tools used to enhance retention at postsecondary institutions. Trenholm State embarked upon an aggressive customer training web-based program developed by Noel-Levitz. Connections NOW consists of 12 modules designed to create a culture of quality service for Trenholm State stakeholders. More specifically, it strengthens customer service, teamwork and customer satisfaction. It provides a structured approach to improving relations with internal and external customers by increasing staff sensitivity and developing personal communication and problem-solving skills. It highlights common service problems, communication issues, campus run-around, and other negative experiences that lead to poor service.

This training was mandated by the College's president, and all full-time employees (166) were given 90 days to complete the training. By mandating the training, the President stressed the importance of excellent customer service at the College for all of our stakeholders, including fellow co-workers. The President wanted the employees to complete the training as soon as possible so that the strategies provided by the training could be implemented as soon as possible. As an incentive to complete the training in 60 days, the employees were randomly divided into ten teams with 15 members. Each team was assigned a team captain, whose responsibility was to motivate the respective team members to complete the training as rapidly as possible to win prizes. Adding prizes created an excitement among the employees about the customer service training. The team captains used creativity to inspire team members, such as one captain did a drawing for a t-shirt and another team captain gave away mugs filled with candy to all team members who completed the training within a specified deadline.

The first team to complete all 12 modules was taken to lunch by the college president. The first individual to complete all 12 modules received a $50 Visa gift card. The employee with the highest post-test score received a $50 Visa gift card. The team captain of the first and second teams to complete all 12 modules received $50 and $25 Visa gift cards, respectively. All employees received a certificate of completion signed by the President.

The Connections Now training was followed by a full-day on-site training conducted by Noel-Levitz, *Moving from Better to Best: Enhancing Customer Services*. This training was a follow-up to the web-based training and it offered employees an opportunity to review the training and discuss scenarios and other customer services challenges as a group. The outcome goals for this workshop were (1) to motivate and mobilize campus staff as Service Champions, (2) empower participants with strategies,

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tactics, and skills to continuously improve service systems and processes, and (3) to improve service quality to the next level of excellence.

Conclusion

Permeating throughout this discussion is its focus on demonstrating accountability, enhancing student success, and improving retention at Trenholm State by developing and implementing strategies designed to achieve this purpose. External stakeholders (governors, legislators, taxpayers, state and federal educational agencies, accrediting bodies) compel postsecondary institutions to prove their quality by measuring college and student outcomes. Internal stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, boards, and students) decry this intense scrutiny but ultimately understand the intent behind the mandates, which is to ensure students receive the knowledge and skills necessary to become productive citizens.

The majority of College employees embraced the opportunity to refresh and enhance their customer service skills using the Noel-Levitz Connections Now training system. The web-based system was followed by a Champion of Service one-day workshop with a Noel-Levitz consultant. Using competition among randomly selected teams created an atmosphere of fun and esprit de corps among the employees.

The Iron Grip Awards Ceremony was designed to recognize those employees who had accepted the challenge to build relationships with our students and take a vested interest in student success. In addition, it was a tool used to encourage others to wholeheartedly accept the challenge. The awardees received special recognition from the college president in the presence of their peers. The College employees were surprised and excited at this activity as the award ceremony was not previously announced.

In 2001, Trenholm State's retention rate was 37%; today it is 51%, which reflects an overall increase of 38%. The fall 2009 51% retention rate at Trenholm State is just shy of the 54% held by Alabama's Community Colleges. Although much progress has been made at Trenholm State, the retention rate is still below the national average of 65.7% in 2007-08 of first-year students returning their sophomore year (ACT, 2009).

Using a simple premise of building a shared purpose among faculty and staff to create a positive and enriching Trenholm State experience for its students, the College developed strategies to positively influence the retention culture of its employees. In implementing retention recognition strategies, the focus of the retention initiative at the College was revitalized and the employees were re-energized. The immediate outcome of this initiative has been renewed interest of employees asking to join the College's Retention Team.

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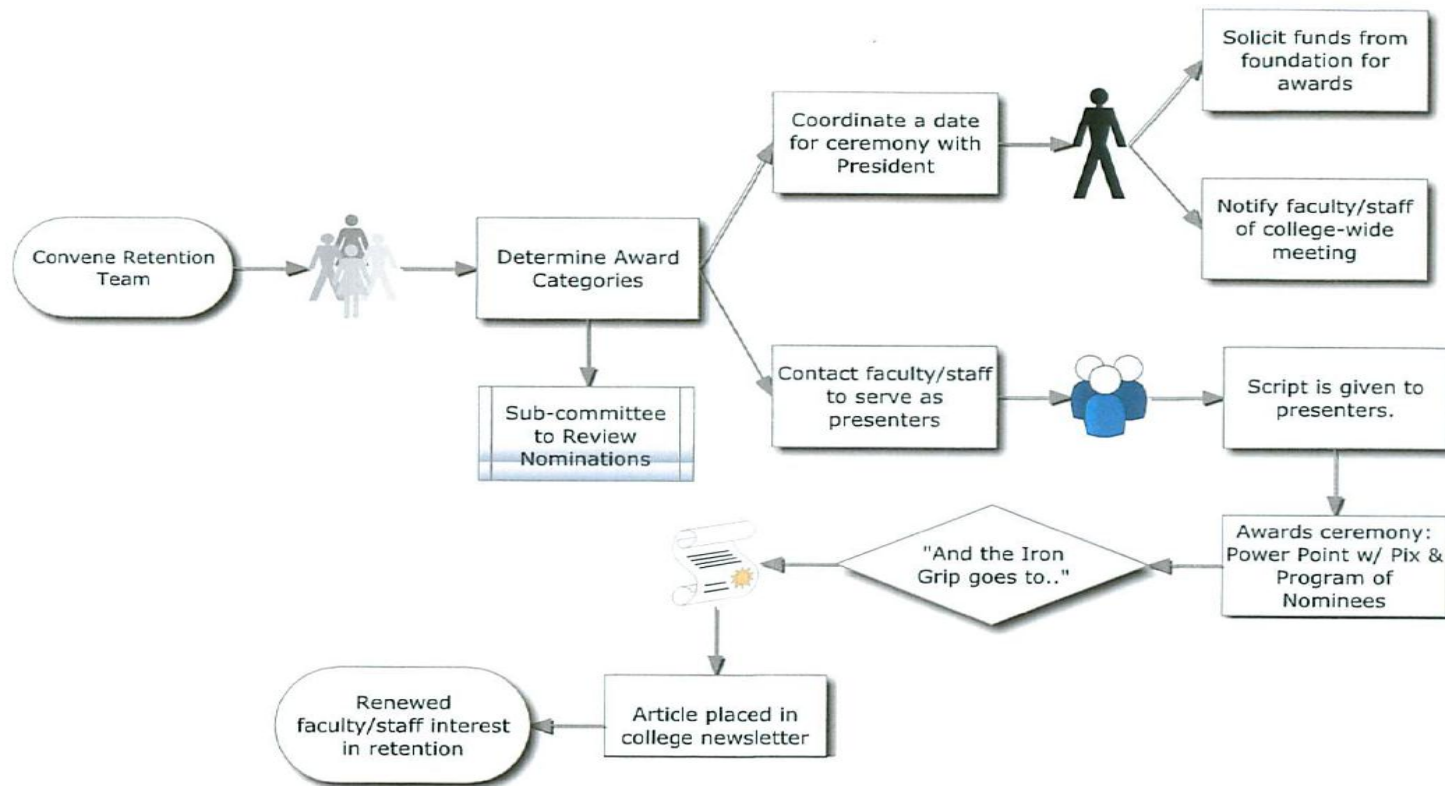
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Appendix

THE IRON GRIP CEREMONY

1. The retention team was convened to determine award categories. Award categories (*The Superior Retainer, Great Strides, and The Keeper of the Students*) were based upon statistical data collected by the College for its Title III reporting mandates.

2. A subcommittee of the retention team was formed to review nominations for two prestigious awards: *The Champion of Students Faculty Award* and *The Champion of Students Staff Award.* The subcommittee was tasked with developing a nomination form for distribution to the President's Cabinet.

3. The retention team voted to model the awards ceremony after the Oscars of the Academy Awards. The name "Iron Grip" was chosen to metaphorically symbolize the difficulty of retaining students.

4. The retention team met with the College President to set a date for the ceremony as well as enlist the President's support in soliciting funds for the event from the College's foundation. Estimated cost for the ceremony was approximately $300 and included fees associated with the certificates and trophies.

5. The retention team contacted faculty and staff to serve as presenters for the event. A script was written and distributed to all presenters. Presenters were not aware of nominees or winners prior to the ceremony.

6. A PowerPoint presentation was developed by the retention team featuring the names, pictures, and departments of nominees for each category. The PowerPoint presentation was projected on to a screen behind the presenters.

7. The College President handed out the trophies.

8. An article was written in the College Newsletter highlighting the Iron Grip Ceremony.

9. The most important outcome of the Iron Grip Ceremony was that it created an air of excitement at the College and caused faculty to see their connection to retention through the lens of personal recognition.

IRON GRIP CEREMONY ACTION STEPS

Convene Retention Team → Determine Award Categories

Determine Award Categories → Coordinate a date for ceremony with President

Coordinate a date for ceremony with President → Solicit funds from foundation for awards

→ Notify faculty/staff of college-wide meeting

Determine Award Categories → Sub-committee to Review Nominations

Determine Award Categories → Contact faculty/staff to serve as presenters → Script is given to presenters.

Script is given to presenters. → Awards ceremony: Power Point w/ Pix & Program of Nominees

Awards ceremony: Power Point w/ Pix & Program of Nominees → "And the Iron Grip goes to.."

"And the Iron Grip goes to.." → Article placed in college newsletter

Article placed in college newsletter → Renewed faculty/staff interest in retention