A new approach to non-traditional student recruitment and retention

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Most current approaches to the retention of Indigenous and other non-traditional students have limited, ad hoc aims and objectives. Nadine Pelling argues for a comprehensive and integrated approach to the problems involved.

In the April 2001 edition of the NTEU *Advocate* it was reported that Indigenous student numbers have fallen below 1995 levels. This fact leads one to wonder what can be done to recruit and retain Indigenous students and what the literature and recent research say about recruiting and retaining nontraditional students. What follows is a review of the literature on nontraditional student recruitment and retention. It is recommended that if we are serious about recruiting and retaining Indigenous students that comprehensive programs be put into place to achieve this goal.

Past Retention Attempts

Many programs have attempted to help nontraditional students remain in university programs and withstand prejudice and discrimination. Previously, efforts were aimed at helping nontraditional students improve their academic performance with academic support, tutoring, and compensatory education (Simmons, 1979; Cervantes, 1988). However, more recent efforts have been focused upon more social and societal barriers to nontraditional retention, because studies have shown that these factors are more related to attrition than low academic performance (Kalsner, 1991).

Retention programs have generally implemented one or two general approaches at increasing nontraditional student retention and could be said to be primarily "band-aid" efforts (Muller, Pavone, & Wetterhahn, 1994). Whereas these programs have shown some short term and limited effects, comprehensive and wide reaching change is needed if widespread and substantial change is to be created. Consequently, a need exists for a comprehensive retention strategy to be created, implemented, and examined for effect. A comprehensive retention strategy will implement a wide range of programs shown to help increase student retention. What follows is a brief overview of some past supported or proposed retention strategies, and their rationale which may be combined in some fashion to create such a comprehensive retention strategy.

Common Components of Retention Strategies

Role Models

As there is currently an under-representation of Indigenous people in various professions and in the university community, there is a consequent lack of role models for nontraditional students within academe. Lacking clear examples of success in any field may lead one to erroneously conclude that success in that area is unlikely. Consequently, a lack of visible proof of possible success results and myths regarding nontraditional workers and students (Parrish & Lea, 1991).

As a result, many have found the visibility of women, and other nontraditional workers, within certain fields key to the future participation of nontraditional people in a field (Baty, 1995; Felder, Felder, Mauney, Jamrin, & Dietz, 1994). As stated by Wittstruck, (1991, p. 16) "Significant increases in the recruitment and retention of black students are not likely to occur unless there is a noticeable increase in the hiring and retention of black faculty". One way in which past retention programs have tried to increase the visibility of nontraditional role models has been to advocate a strong nontraditional faculty recruitment policy to provide students with nontraditional role models. This effort may be coupled with an introductory class designed to give a brief history of nontraditional successes that appropriately highlights nontraditional student and worker achievements. This could help students identify relevant role models, both current and historical, and the special difficulties faced by many nontraditional workers (Turner, Pinon, & Robbins, 1994).

Support Systems

A lack of current nontraditional role models within training programs may make it less likely that a nontraditional

student will find and utilise a mentor within the field. Moreover, since cross-race relationships take longer to initiate and are less likely to end in a friendly fashion and cross-sex relationships often result in sexual innuendo, successful mentoring relationships seem less likely (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). This is a shame as mentors have been shown to be helpful in later work adjustment since they can provide practical and experience based activities, as well as provide opportunity for mutual enhancement and growth (Barnett, 1990; Krueger, Blackwell, & Knight, 1992; Waller, 1994). Couple this information with the fact that nontraditional students are numerical minorities within many programs, feelings of isolation can result (Pruitt & Isaac, 1985).

To offset these feelings of isolation and a resulting decrease in academic performance, actual mentorship programs have been instituted by institutions of higher learning to aid in the pairing of mentors with students new to different fields (Wittstruck, 1988; Kalsner, 1991). However, training on how to be a mentor and to be mentored may be required to deal with the before mentioned problems with cross-gender and cross-racial mentoring (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). In order for this to be a positive interaction the program may also need to be voluntary and thus a lack of mentors may result. This lack of mentors may be alleviated with the use of professionals currently in various fields versus having a mentoring program relying on university personnel. If a lack of mentors remains it may also be possible to institute a peer mentoring relationship, pairing more advanced students with newer students (Muller, Pavone, & Wetterhahn, 1994). The use of Internet email discussion groups may also aid in forming connections between students in a safe manner. This may help nontraditional students to blend new experiences with their traditional cultures and values by allowing for discussion of the contradictions and special difficulties nontraditional students find with university education (Chavez, 1986).

Moreover, actual nontraditional student support groups and student interaction programs may also help as such groups have been shown to be helpful in the workplace (Morrison & von Glinow, 1990; Parrish & Lea, 1991). Such peer support groups have also been identified as critical for success in some education programs (Anderson, 1994; Barnicki & Stein, 1994; Hood, 1992). As stated by, Bsarnicki and Stein (1994, p. 2465) "the early establishment of personal connections is crucial in helping women become comfortable". Students could be aided in the creation of specific support groups, encouraged to join existing student support groups, or encouraged to participate in existing professional groups as student members (Felder, Felder, Mauney, Jamrin, & Dietz, 1994). A multicultural center could also be developed as a resource for students and faculty (Johnson, 1991).

Financial Support

Many students require financial assistance to complete their education and the issue of institutional support for nontraditional students is especially important (Wittstruck, 1988; Lassiter, 1983). Financial support could be provided to nontraditional students to work within their programs under their faculty's supervision and thus help reduce dependency on funding sources outside the university that may interfere with one's academic studies (Adams, 1986). This could possibly provide a number of positive effects. First, students would be provided with some type of stipend or work study funding to pay for their education and living expenses. Second, students would have increased contact with their departments and faculty thus possibly increasing feelings of involvement with same and the creation of positive mentoring relationships. Third, as stated by Muller, Pavone, and Wetterhahn (1994, p. 1448) "the mere existence of the [women in science] project on campus makes them feel supported and encouraged" by the department and faculty. Programs such as this have been suggested for engineering programs and it is possible that such programs will have a similar effect in other fields that need to increase their nontraditional student retention rates (Adams, 1988).

Multicultural Training - Faculty

Felder, Felder, Mauney, Jamrin, & Dietz (1994, p. 1255) indicate that "All faculty members should be made aware of the difficulties faced by women engineering students and of the resources on campus - support groups, mentorship programs, and trained counsellors, etc. - available to help the women cope with and overcome these difficulties". The same could be said to be true for Indigenous students. It is possible that other nontraditional students within the university environment would also benefit from such faculty education. Moreover, traditional faculty members may also benefit from some training on the contributions of nontraditional workers within the university environment and various fields, as well as some of the unique difficulties Indigenous populations may face, such as how misunderstandings may arise from differing communication styles (Lassiter, 1983; Waller, 1994). This may be important as some studies suggest that differences in professorial attitudes and behaviours have contributed to attrition rates in some programs (McDade, 1988; Cervantes, 1988). Thus, multicultural training may lead to a greater acceptance of nontraditional students who might be seen as less of a novelty once the history of nontraditional participation in the field is illuminated .

Multicultural Training - Students

The larger student body may also benefit from multicultural training. A brief history that appropriately highlights Indigenous achievements may also serve to increase the multicultural awareness of the larger student body. More-

over, multicultural instruction may serve to help students recognize and appreciate cultural diversity issues as they relate to their field (Johnson, 1991).

Introductory Class

Many programs have suggested that an initial hands-on experience in the various fields can help in nontraditional retention efforts. During such a course interest in the field as well as study tools for success can be solidified. Where as the focus is generally on aspects of the program that students find most interesting, information on support services, study skill development, and tutoring services may also be provided (Hood, 1992). Specifically, students can be provided with information regarding the general college experience, common adjustment problems, financial support, and academic help if needed (Kalsner, 1991). Having the logistics of campus life clearly explained may serve to lower student stress and increase comfortableness and thus eventual student retention (Christoffel, 1986).

Moreover, entering students could be encouraged to create supportive networks that may help them survive more difficult times in their program of study (Turner, Pinon, & Robbins, 1994). This may be particularly important during the beginning of one's studies as half of all attrition appears to occur within the first three semesters of training, presumably as education fails to respond one initial interest in the field (Gonzalez, 1995).

Conclusion

Whereas the traditional approach to Indigenous student recruitment and retention may have been to support students via financial assistance, past research indicates that a more comprehensive approach is needed and should include social, structural, and financial support which includes efforts by all students, administration, and faculty. If we are serious about the retention and recruitment of Indigenous students then a comprehensive approach is needed.

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