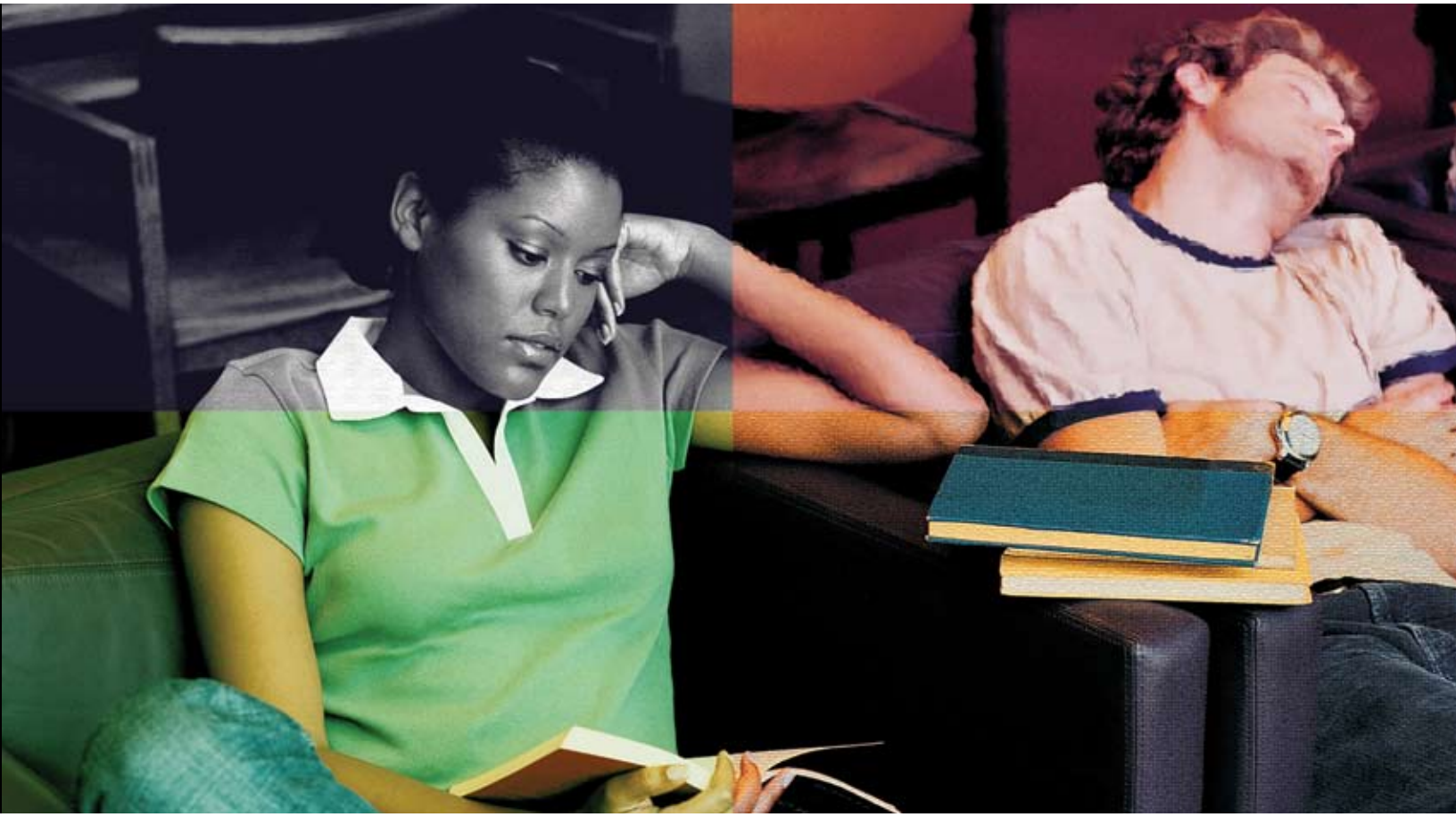

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By Dr. Marcia A. Roman

Community College Admission and Student Retention

Abstract

Community colleges enroll nearly half the undergraduates in the U.S. These institutions play a significant role in the academic, social, political, and economic future of our nation. As historically open admission institutions, with a primary focus on providing access to higher education, they have been pressed in recent decades—as has all of higher education—to be more accountable and demonstrate the benefits they offer and at what cost. A common measure of accountability is student retention. What role do admission officers play in student retention? While the admission processes may be quite different between four-year institutions and community colleges, the purposes are similar. Insofar as they set the stage for what it takes to be successful in college, admission officers play a crucial role in the broader student life cycle that extends from prospect to alumnus.

Community Colleges

Community colleges are uniquely American in their genesis and are founded on democratic traditions (Wattenbarger and Albertson, 2004). Historically open admission institutions, their purpose has evolved far beyond providing the first two years of a bachelor's degree (Milliron and Wilson, 2004). Community college missions now include preparing students for transfer to four-year institutions, vocational education, contract education for local employers, remediation of basic skills, and even community services (Wattenbarger and Albertson, 2004; Gooden and Matus-Grossman, 2002). American democracy fueled the expansion of community colleges as un-served, average citizens were the institutions' target demographic (Witt, et al., 1994). Community colleges now serve as a major component in the higher education system in the United States (Dougherty, 1987; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Community college advocates have argued that these institutions serve larger societal roles by providing access, social mobility and thus serve a type of democratizing function (Dougherty, 1987; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). By extending educational opportunity beyond the elites of society for whom it was once reserved, community colleges open doors to employment and higher paying jobs, help to build the tax base and develop persons who contribute to the political and local community (Carnevale and Desrochers, 2004; Gooden and Matus-Grossman, 2002; McClenney, 2004a).

Because community colleges serve as a major vehicle to prepare people for the workforce, and employers need increasing numbers of knowledge workers to remain competitive, these institutions are a significant player in the economic development of their local communities (Jenkins, 2002). Access to education beyond high school is fundamental to both individuals and to society for social and economic development (Carnevale and Desrochers, 2004; Education Commission of the States: U.S. profile, October 2003). "Without universal and lifelong access to the benefits of a college education, the nation simply will fail to meet the social and economic challenges of the years ahead." (Ruppert, 2003, p. 7).

Types of Students

Community colleges enroll almost half of American undergraduates (Center for Community College Policy, 2000; McClenney, 2004a; Randall, 2004). They attract high proportions of low-income, first-generation college students and students of color, those typically underserved by higher education (American Association of Community Colleges, 2005; Townsend, Donaldson, and Wilson, 2005). While community colleges have long been committed to and have made significant gains in providing access, access alone does not always translate to success.

Community college students are often described as non-traditional as compared to traditional college students who attend a residential college full-time immediately after high school graduation, are aged 18-24, and have a primary focus on school (Bean and Metzner, 1985). As shown in Table 1, most community college students have at least one of the characteristics of non-traditional students and as such, display risk factors and face barriers associated with those factors at much higher rates than students who attend four year institutions (Hamm, 2004; Jenkins, 2002; Price, 2004).

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Students by Risk Factor and Institution Type

Risk Factor	Public Two-Year Institution	Public Four-Year Institution
Delayed Enrollment	45.6	18.0
GED/HS dropout	12.1	1.8
Part-time Attendance	47.4	11.2
Financial Independence	34.5	8.1
One or More Children	20.6	4.2
Single Parent	10.0	2.4
Work Full-time	35.1	10.5
Source: NCES, 2003 as noted in Price (2004)		

Non-traditional students, and likewise, community college students, have multiple commitments, are multi-tasking, often struggle to balance work, family and school, and are commuters, in part, because community colleges are largely non-residential (Gooden and Matus-Grossman, 2002; Tinto, 1993; Voorhees, 1987). Increasing diversity of American undergraduates has been noted in both four- and two-year institutions (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998; Ruppert, 2003). Future enrollments in community colleges are projected to increase between 2000 and 2015 both because of demographic changes and because increasing percentages of the population will pursue higher education for the opportunities they offer (Boswell, 2004; Martinez, 2004a). Among traditional-aged college students, most of the increase will be of students of color and those from low-income households (Price, 2004).

Policymakers will likely look to community colleges to accommodate the enrollment demands since "expenditures per student at community colleges are less than at baccalaureate institutions" (Martinez, 2004a, p. 23). With such varied differences and needs, serving the diverse populations is difficult (Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education, 2005). It is also expensive (Jenkins, 2002; Summers, 2003).

Admission staffmembers need to be skillful in reaching out to these populations, bridging the cultural gap that may divide them, in order to encourage and educate them about the opportunities that a college education provides. They must be welcoming, approachable and encouraging, assuming that students may understand very little about what it takes not only to get into college, but to be successful there. Colleges would do well to educate and support admission staff about how to lay the groundwork of setting expectations and providing admission staff with appropriate literature about college requirements and support services. It will also be beneficial for admission staff to talk with students and their significant others about the time and effort necessary, and their share of responsibility for learning as well as the various support services available.

Increasing Importance of Student Retention

Student retention has been identified for decades as an important measure of institutional effectiveness (Wild and Ebbers, 2002), because retention and the student enrollments they represent can be translated into amounts of revenue, whether from FTE reimbursements or tuition and fees. Institutions are increasingly held accountable for retention rates by state governments, a number of which have accountability measures that associate funding with retention rates, as well as by policy makers, business leaders, consumer advocates, parents, and students. Despite increasing demands for accountability, relatively little research has been conducted on community college retention. Most research on student retention has consisted of single institution studies that pertain to residential baccalaureate institutions (Henningsen, 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998) that do not lend themselves to generalizability (Bailey and Alfonso, 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Models of student retention, even those used in community colleges are largely informed by research focused on four-year institutions and the typical traditional aged white and affluent demographic (Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Voorhees, 1987). Community colleges serve a different demographic and have broader missions than most four-year institutions, yet are often compared to four-year institutions and are noted for poorer retention rates. (Bailey, Jenkins and Leinbach, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Despite these challenges, community colleges are called to rise to the occasion since so much is at stake.

A promising construct that has emerged over the past several decades is that of student involvement or engagement. Despite the lack of a substantial amount of research that provides clear direction on improving student retention in community colleges, there is a "broad body of research and theoretical perspectives indicating that positive educational outcomes are associated with student engagement" (Marti, 2006, p. 4). Pace (1984) conducted studies on the quality of effort and time on task invested by students. Astin (1984) posed a theory of student development, which associated the proportion of student learning to both the quality and quantity of student involvement. According to Astin, "student involvement refers to the amount of physical and

psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Effective educational practices are those that elicit investment of sufficient student energy (Astin, 1984). Tinto (1987) emphasized the importance of academic and social integration to student learning and persistence. He later described integration as student involvement (Tinto, 1993). Chickering and Gamson (1987) developed what have been termed by Kuh (2003) as engagement indicators in their seminal work of the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education." Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs were later developed by ACPA and NASPA, which paralleled the Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education and stressed the importance of student commitment and student involvement, as well as institutional commitment and institutional support. These documents characterized the learning college movement and with it the emerging importance of institutional focus on student learning and the collaboration required between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to be effective.

Building on the volume of research conducted in the four-year sector of higher education, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was developed and field tested in 1998 (Kuh, 2001) to assess and benchmark student activities that measure student engagement (Kuh, 2003). An instrument appropriate for use by community colleges, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement's *Community College Student Report*, soon followed.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) was launched in 2001 as a project of the Community College Leadership Program based at The University of Texas at Austin. Grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the MetLife Foundation, and Houston Endowment supported the effort. The purpose was to raise public awareness about the work of community colleges, stimulate discussion and dialogue about how quality is defined and measured, and provide an appropriate assessment tool for their work. Based on extensive research that pertains to student learning and persistence, the CCSSE has defined five benchmarks of educational practice (CCSSE, 2006b). The benchmarks are: active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, student effort, academic challenge and support for learners. By improving and increasing practices assessed by each of the benchmarks, institutions stand to improve student learning and retention (CCSSE, 2006a; Marti, 2004).

The Role of Admission in Student Retention

As institutions have become more focused on enrollment management, resources have often been devoted to admission and alumni relations, but not as much to student outcomes in the middle of the student life cycle (Shaver, 2006). Admission officers and college promotional media play a critical role in setting the stage for student expectations. Tinto (1993) asserts that "The beginning of the sequence of events leading to student departure can be traced to students' first formal contact with the institution, namely their recruitment and admission" (p. 154). Insofar as student engagement is a factor in student success, including engagement as student effort and academic challenge, then admission officers have a responsibility to be clear about the expectations their institutions hold for students—including if not especially at open admission institutions. The literature used to recruit students should reflect this. Rather than emphasizing only what a college education buys a student in terms of future earnings, the many opportunities to make new friends and have fun, it is unwise and short-sighted for institutions to enlist or allow admission officers to present these as the only or most salient features their institution offers in order to entice more to apply and be admitted in order to meet enrollment targets. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education has published guidelines for admission programs that include helping students set realistic expectations for what is required of them as college students (Miller, 1999). Admission officers might recommend early on that students take a College Success class, pro-actively take advantage of tutoring and library services, as well as advising and career planning resources. Admission officers might engage students in conversations about what they already know of the educational requirements of professions students state they intend to pursue and then provide information about those requirements and related alternative professions. It may also entail introducing students to institutional career development resources or encouraging them to take a Career and Life Planning course, which are commonly offered in community colleges. Admission staff can also encourage students to be involved or engaged in the activities and services that will help them to be successful, whether those are limited primarily to class activities and support services, or extend beyond into student life and community service activities.

"Insofar as student engagement is a factor in student success, including engagement as student effort and academic challenge, then admission officers have a responsibility to be clear about the expectations their institutions hold for students—including if not especially at open admission institutions."

The Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, recently conducted a study of the

"Admission officers play a role in setting the stage for student retention by advising, counseling and teaching students early on about not only all the opportunities that higher education in general and their institution in particular offer, but the requirements that go with capitalizing on those opportunities."

Florida Community Colleges to assess different practices of institutions with high and low minority student retention rates. One of their observations was the detrimental impact of institutional focus on enrollment and myopia regarding student experiences and retention (Jenkins, Bailey, Crosta, Leinbach, Marshall, Soonachan and VanNoy, 2006). It was noted that this focus is not uncommon and is certainly understandable when institutional budgets—already suffering from declining state appropriations nationwide—remain largely based on FTE. Yet a singular focus on meeting enrollment targets and increasing the yield rate of prospect to applicant to enrollment is short-sighted in terms of what it costs students, as well as institutions. Admission staffs are part of the institutional fabric, not merely the front door. Institutional leaders need to support staffs that engage students at every stage of the student life cycle so that the message to students is clear and consistent—high expectations, necessary student effort and institutional support. It is important that there be congruence between what recruiting and admission staff promise and what the colleges deliver.

Although Tinto's focus (1993) was on four-year residential institutions, his conviction about the importance of admission counseling to student retention is not irrelevant to other types of institutions of higher education. He elaborates (p. 157):

> "The work of admissions officers should entail counseling and advising as much as it does recruiting. By so serving student needs, admissions officers enhance the likelihood not only that more students will seek to enter the institution—as student tend to seek out such institutions—but also that those who do enter will be more likely to stay until degree completion. The underlying principle is one of commitment, commitment on the part of the institution to the welfare of students and the resulting commitment engendered on the part of students to the institution."

Admission officers play a role in setting the stage for student retention by advising, counseling and teaching students early on about not only all the opportunities that higher education in general and their institution in particular offer, but the requirements that go with capitalizing on those opportunities. Admission staff might help to lay the groundwork of student expectations by providing appropriate literature about college requirements and support services, talking with students and their significant others about the time and effort necessary, as well as their share of responsibility for their learning. They must be skillful in welcoming and encouraging, while presuming that students may understand very little about what it takes to get in and then to be successful in college. Admission staff can encourage students to be involved in the activities and services that will help them to be successful, whether those are limited primarily to class activities and support services, or extend beyond into student life and community service activities. This may be especially important with the Millennial generation which has been shown to be less engaged based on CCSSE benchmark scores than their older counterparts.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Students by Risk Factor and Institution Type

Risk Factor	Public Two-Year Institution	Public Four-Year Institution
Delayed Enrollment	45.6	18.0
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Work Full-time	35.1	10.5
Source: NCES, 2003 as noted in Price (2004)		

Admission staffs and their leaders need to be aware of and involved in college operations that extend beyond the threshold of the admission office. Academic affairs has a vested interest in the work of admission staff not only in terms of the number of students recruited and admitted to the college, but by what message and layer of messages. In terms of quality and integrity, college administrators need to be concerned that their institution sends a consistent message at every stage of the student life cycle that extends from prospect to alumnus and that there is congruence between what admission staffs promise and what their institution delivers. A corresponding basic understanding of the importance of academic and social involvement and engagement—not only by faculty, counselors, administrators and staff at the institution, but by admission officers as well, will likely serve students, their institutions and society at large which desperately needs a skilled, educated and developed citizenry.

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