

REACHING HIGHER: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AND DEPARTURE

CHEGANDO MAIS ALTO: ENTENDENDO O DESENVOLVIMENTO E A EVASÃO DOS ALUNOS

Camila Quevedo Oppelt¹

camila.quevedo-oppelt@fulbrightmail.org

Resumo: Desde a sua fundação, as instituições de ensino superior demonstraram uma preocupação com as altas taxas de evasão dos alunos, que levaram a uma proliferação de estudos focados no interesse e retenção dos estudantes universitários nos anos 70 (ASTIN, 1975; COPE e HANNAH, 1975; LENNING, 1978; TINTO, 1975). Concentrando-se no papel das instituições, este estudo de caso exploratório-qualitativo visa—em uma perspectiva histórica—desvendar como as instituições estão observando o interesse e o desgaste dos alunos e de que forma (e se) elas estão agindo a este respeito. A partir de uma entrevista com uma especialista e de materiais documentais, foi constatado que é através de programas de liderança acadêmica, bem como de painéis de discussão que os alunos têm a oportunidade de se envolver na comunidade universitária aprendendo com e de seus pares.

Palavras-chave: Sucesso escolar acadêmico. Evasão. Instituições educacionais.

Abstract: Since its foundation, post-secondary institutions have demonstrated a concern to the high rates of student departure which has led to a proliferation of studies focused on college students' interest and retention in the 1970s (ASTIN, 1975; COPE; HANNAH, 1975; LENNING, 1978; TINTO, 1975). Concentrating on the institutions' role, this exploratory-qualitative case study aims at—in a historical perspective—finding out how some united statesian institutions have been viewing student interest and attrition and how (and if) they have been acting upon it. Drawing from an interview with an expert as well as from a documental research, it was observed that such institutions have succeeded through programs of academic and student leadership as well as through discussion panels at which students are given the opportunity to engage in the college community—learning with and from their peers.

Keywords: Student academic success. Student departure. Educational institutions.

1 Introduction

Since its foundation, post-secondary institutions have demonstrated a concern to the high rates of student departure which has led to a proliferation of studies focused on college students' interest and retention in the 1970s (ASTIN, 1975; COPE; HANNAH, 1975;

¹ Doutora em Linguística Aplicada (Unisinos); professora de Português e Inglês do IFFar (Campus Frederico Westphalen) e tutora à distância do curso de Pedagogia do IFSul (Campus Pelotas).

LENNING, 1978; TINTO, 1975). Nonetheless, the findings are still far from conclusive. Invested in discovering what influences on a student's decision to withdrawal from a course/degree or what drives their decision to keep on, scholars have developed theories and models to address and overcome it².

Many are the procedures being adopted by educational institutions (as the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh and EAB Awards mentioned below) including the establishment of departments and divisions responsible for student development and student academic success. Focusing on these issues and concentrating on the institutions' role, this study aims at—in a historical perspective—finding out how united statesian institutions have been viewing student interest and attrition and how (and if) they have been acting upon it.

2 Theory and Practice

According to the Institute of Education Sciences³, in 2006, an average of 59% of the students matriculated in a four-year US institution completed the degree they were seeking. Although this data refers to first-time, full-time undergraduate students, it gives evidence to support the importance of studies interested in preventing students' departure. This issue has drawn the attention of scholars from the most diverse perspectives—namely sociological, psychological, organizational, economic, and cultural (CHEN, 2008; HABLEY et al., 2012).

Among the many studies in the field, two theoretical views attempting to explain and suggesting approaches to student departure are worth mentioning: Vincent Tinto's and John Bean's models. From a sociological perspective, Tinto's Interactionalist Model (1975, 1986, 1993) focuses primarily on students' traits and how they may influence students' persistence and withdrawal, more specifically through students' integration and interaction. According to Tinto, student departure is a reflection of the interaction between the student and the environment—not exclusively the institution.

On an organizational perspective, Bean's Model of Student Departure (1980) addresses the students' and the institutions' shared responsibility and to what extent—depending on the interaction between the two—students' satisfaction could implicate on their decision to withdrawal. In Bean's study, a greater attention to the institution's role is posited as primordial to understanding and reducing student departure.

² Tinto's and Beans' models are further discussed later in this section.

³ Available at: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cva.asp

One of the positive impacts of academic studies (and concerns) in the topic like the ones mentioned above and here discussed is the establishment of the Education Advisory Board (EAB) in 2007. EAB is under the umbrella of the Advisory Board Company, a nonprofit research and consulting firm, and assigns an annual Student Success Collaborative Award to deserving US higher-learning institutions. The three 2014 institutions selected were recognized for their success in elevating the student retention rates (CNN, 2014) with an impressive 20% increase at the California State University among them. Both the EAB and the Student Success Collaborative Award mirror the increased concern in dealing with student retention.

These institutions are—amongst others—following what researchers have long advocated: to consider evaluating the students upon entry level to focus on the ones who may be at risk of departure and work on programs to prevent departure from happening. Tinto (2006b), for instance, assesses and makes suggestions to institutions' administrators to improve their student retention assessment programs. According to the author, much attention is needed in the design of these assessment tests in which he addresses every stage of preparation and evaluation (from question formation to data collection and analysis) as well as how to use the results to both the institutions' and the students' advantage.

By taking advantage of the assessment tests and programs, institutions have shared their success stories as is the retention-and-success program of the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh (VENDITUOLI, 2014). By administering a series of surveys, administrators gain the necessary information of what is probably causing student attrition and they are then able to implement programs to concurrently decrease student attrition and raise their interest and motivation. This is an example of action upon the suggestions made by scholars' studies.

On the whole, scholars have been focusing their investigations on the key aspects influencing student attrition and, consequently, proposing methods and strategies to lower dropout rates. In doing so, they have significantly contributed to the establishment of departments and divisions within institutions of higher education. In these departments, the staff, focused on student development and academic success, can be a reliable source of what has been accomplished in terms of programs and resources.

With that in mind, this study draws from an interview with such an expert, Dr. Elizabeth Palacios, to shed some light on the institutions' perspective. The interview was given to this author in the fall semester of 2014 at Baylor University. The result of this interview is presented in the next section.

3 An Expert's Insight

Professionals such as Dr. Elizabeth Palacios (OPPELT, 2014a), Dean of Student Development at Baylor University, devote their energy toward student development by keeping them motivated and interested. Once a student at risk herself, Dr. Palacios has a fresh perspective over the extent to institutions' interventions in the students' academic life. According to her, much has improved in terms of understanding how to approach a student and what resources and programs are more appropriate by seeing each student as a particular case in hand.

One of the programs Dr. Palacios mentions is the Mini Clips, in which tools are given to students so they can take on leading roles and succeed by themselves, giving them the opportunity to try out what they believe is more appropriate and needed in relation to their necessities—regardless of them being related to their academic sphere or their personal realm. As she stated, this is a new perspective since the student development departments used to take on a parental role in which they would try to prevent students to fail, predicting failure and departure to be correlated. Rather the contrary, she maintained that students must learn from their mistakes and that it is part of their developing process.

Failure, however, cannot be attributed to a disconnection in college, which in turn can also be understood as a source of student attrition and departure. As Dr. Palacios stresses, the importance of keeping an open channel of communication between the different groups within the student body can create an enhanced understanding of their cultural differences, for instance. Given that through discussion panels students would understand their counterpart's background meets with Tinto's model of student integration and interaction. This sense of community stresses that every student is valued and needed and that them being left feeling ignored only increases their risk of departure.

Baylor (OPPELT, 2014a) also makes use of a survey to predict students' attrition (as the one used at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, mentioned above) called MAP Works that she described as a "self-reported perception of [their] success." According to the result in this survey, faculty and staff approach students with the most appropriate resource. Dr. Palacios mentions the case of a student who was not motivated enough and what was lacking was a sense of community in which she could be part of a group community, thus not exclusively developing academically but also personally.

Along with the lack of sense of community, she acknowledges the many characteristics of a student at risk of departure and she stresses an important one which concerns students'

internal and external locus of control—the first is related to the student taking charge of their own learning and looking for ways to improve and overcome their own difficulties, while the latter is when a student attributes their problems as everyone else’s accountable but themselves.

In this regard, Dr. Elizabeth Palacios emphasized again the importance of students’ sense of community and that some students must be motivated into feeling integrated and that it takes the faculty and staff to support them to feel empowered and consequently persevere.

The issue of student attrition and withdrawal being still a topic under discussion is positive since she admits the importance of ‘filling more blanks’ around campus; for instance, with the implementation of a stronger and more focused department involved in minority students’ development. She also mentions the need for programs developed to instruct professors on how to deal with different student backgrounds and how to overcome student attrition—beyond stereotypes and preconceptions.

In sum, Dr. Palacios’ department of student development proves effective in taking advantage of the different approaches to at-risk students as well as she has a positive perspective over how much student development departments have accomplished and that, since her undergraduate days, programs and resources reach more students in need of support.

4 Then and Now

As discussed above, much has changed since studies have aimed at student dropout, persistence, retention, and attrition. The twentieth century saw a dramatic expansion in programs and resources in institutions of higher education in the United States; administrators and professionals interested in understanding and helping students persevere and persist have now assigned departments, for instance.

At the time of their foundation, American colleges were not particularly interested in retaining students as much as they were focusing on admissions. Access was a more pressing issue for college administrators and dropout seemed much less important and stigmatized than it is to this day (THELIN; GASMAN, 2003). It is not until the early 1900s that administrators became aware of the importance of student completion, especially financially—since it is less expensive to maintain a student matriculated than to attract new students.

Response to the acknowledgement and growing concern to the low student retention rate has coincided with the enrollment boom of the time. As Americans became interested in the prestige of a college education (or rather, college life), faculty and staff showed attempts at

addressing the issue, noticed much earlier than the documented research studies. The 1930s was, for instance, particularly interesting at Baylor University. Proactive and very concerned with student academic success, Dean Jones lead the institution toward the understanding of the importance of dealing with student success and therefore to the increase of graduation rates (OPPELT, 2014b). Baylor's example is a reflection of what were the growing concerns of the time.

Is it surmised (Dean Jones serves as an example) that the concerns have started first within the institutions' administration and later attracting the interest of scholars. From tentative and very shy procedures (as Baylor's failure cards of the 1930s) to specialized departments developing tests and surveys (as Baylor's Map Works of today), the accomplishments in the study and design of tools to overcome high student departure rates has been very positive. These tools help predict which students are at risk of departure and therefore help professors and administrators design programs and offer different resources to help those students to persevere and persist.

Such positive outcomes are evidenced since graduating was a rare event in the early ages of college history (THELIN; GASMAN, 2003) while, as stated above, in 2006, it reached 59%. Many are the factors influencing this increase, but the efforts of scholars, faculty, and staff to retain students are surely amongst them. Motivating students to take on leading roles in college, for example, is one of the methods adopted by professionals to retain students. Students taking on leadership roles provide them with the opportunity to foster change in their own college life (ASTIN; ASTIN, 2000).

One important point to be considered is that there are many programs and resources developed to address student retention, and many have proven effective, but one has been given less attention by scholars: to motivate students into taking responsibility for their own study and to grant them leading roles has brought positive impacts on completion rates. Yet, as Dr. Palacios mentioned, to assign a leadership role is not successful with every student; students' characteristics have to be taken into consideration. Studying the students' own reasons for attrition serve as evidence toward a decision to use a certain resource and/or approach. This information can be retrieved from one amongst the approaches to dealing with student attrition: the administering of tests and surveys to prevent/reduce student attrition considering the students' personal characteristics that could make them more susceptible to withdrawal.

Therefore, considering students' characteristics from the early 1800s to the early 2000s, it is possible to pinpoint some similarities and some differences. At its foundation, the American post-secondary institution was primarily serving the upper- and middle-class white male.

Education was first viewed as a privilege but with no concrete purposes and it would only be perceived as professional training approximately a century later. Hence the high dropout rates of the time: if students could not realize the importance of education in their personal and professional lives, completion was therefore not viewed as important.

Nowadays, college students' attrition is attributed to a variety of causes: financial, familial, educational background, and cultural background to name a few. As Dr. Palacios pointed out, there are various programs to help overcome students' difficulties, but a view of the student's specific problems and a suitable approach is of primordial importance. Therefore, as student characteristics have changed so has changed the cause for student departure which will be further addressed in the following section.

5 The Setting

As Darryl Peterkin (2013) has stated, institutions of higher learning are not immune to external factors, but rather the contrary, the institutions and the immediate (and nowadays, global) environment are mutually influential.

In such context, one can have a clearer image of the influences upon the views of student success and student retention. Higher education was first seen as an institution engaged in educating men into becoming gentlemen, with the focus on training them to become social leaders. Skills such as oratory and eloquence where the main purpose of these institutions (WINTERER, 1998) and not necessarily a diploma.

In the 1800s faculty and staff constituted of a few professors and a small number of monitors (at times, professor themselves) to maintain students' behavior as deemed appropriate. There were no policies that guided the curriculum design (THELIN, 2003). The cultural and societal view of an educated person was reduced to the power of speech. Colleges were not seen as a place to get trained and acquire knowledge necessary for their professional life, but rather as a transitory institution concerned with specific skills that could work towards the students' (or more precisely, their family's) interest in public service.

As foreign models of post-secondary educational institutions became known by American college administrators, job positions demanding specific professional expertise, and even formal military skills became essential, institutions began to perceive the imperative importance of restructuring their models of education (THELIN, 2003). This does not entail

restructuring was a characteristic of that era, as post-secondary educational institutions have gone through many over the past decades.

Another difference between the foundation and today's institutions of higher learning is concerning access. Over the next century, different degrees were conferred to not only the upper- and middle-class white men, but to a growing student population of minorities—namely women, African descendants, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. Their needs were different emphasizing the much-needed changes in curriculum and in attention to dropout rates (THELIN, 2003). It is still true that minorities are the groups with the highest risk of departure and the development of programs to attend their needs has been given more attention by the institutions' administrators, faculty, and staff (OPPELT, 2014a).

The fast growing need of expertise and the interest in science flourished through the establishment of graduate courses across the country. Policies were also created to maintain quality and consistency in the degrees conferred by the different institutions. Hence, with a growing access to college, the interest in student completion began to receive more attention (OPPELT, 2014a).

In the midst of this turmoil, those appointed responsible for student departure were the students themselves and not the institution (TINTO, 2006a). By exonerating themselves of any responsibility, the institutions failed in providing a welcoming environment to student development, hence increasing the risk of student withdrawal.

However, in the 1960s, the government's investment in financial aid to students was a great achievement to those students at risk of departure due to financial constraints. Thus considered a positive attitude of the federal government, which proved itself interested in resolving one of the main reasons for student dropout. Nonetheless, its recent shift from student funding grants to loans has brought back the issue to the record amount of student debt.

Also in the twentieth century, student personnel professionals and departments were developed to concentrate on these students. All these efforts put into at-risk students has been positively view by many scholars (ASTIN; ASTIN, 2000; TINTO, 2006a) which have also admitted there is still a lot more to be done.

6 Final Remarks

Emphasis on student development and on lowering student dropout rates has been projected with the many studies held by scholars in the 1970s. Advocates for the creation of

programs and resources to improve students' academic achievement have seen some of their suggestions transformed into institution departments and personnel.

Accomplishments in addressing students' needs and providing them with the opportunity to lead and excel are evidenced by statistical data. As Dr. Palacios commemorates, many are the possibilities students have toward developing a sense of community and to grasp their part in academic life. It is through programs of academic and student leadership and discussion panels that students are given the opportunity to engage in the college community—learning with and from their peers.

However, the government's attempt to help with students' financial strain by offering financial aid in the 1960s, no other accomplishment has been more effective than the establishment of departments working toward student development. The professionals in these departments have been designing, implementing, and administering resources to aid them with wrought information to address the students' problems and work toward the decrease of student departure rates.

Attention to the institutions' role has been a key factor toward understanding the intricacies and the possibilities in dealing with student dropout. Certainly, many of the causes for student attrition are in the personal level, but the institution has to provide a safe and healthy environment for students to flourish and develop academically and personally.

Transcending all these issues, students are imparted with opportunities to experience new roles and to push their own boundaries. Academic life has to be provided for students in their own time (ASTIN, 1984) and considering their own characteristics (as Dr. Palacios has stressed).

References

- ASTIN, A. W., & ASTIN, H. S. **Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change**. Battle Creek, MI: Kellogg Foundation, 2000.
- ASTIN, A. W. Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. **Journal of college student personnel**, v. 25, n. 4, p. 297-308, 1984.
- BEAN, J. P. Why students leave: Insights from research. In D. HOSSLER, J. P. BEAN, & Associates (Org.), **The strategic management of college enrollments**. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990. p. 170-185
- BEAN, J. P. Dropouts and turnover: The synthesis and test of a causal model of student attrition. **Research in higher education**, v. 12, n. 2, p. 155-187, 1980.

- CHEN, R. Financial aid and student dropout in higher education: A heterogeneous research approach. In: SMART, J. C. (Org.) **Higher Education: Handbook of theory and research**. Springer Netherlands, 2008. pp. 209-239
- UNIVERSITIES receive national awards after retention increases as large as 4.7% and 8.3%. **CNN**. Available at: <<http://news/newsfeeds/articles/prnewswire/PH61767.htm>>. Accessed on: 10 nov. 2014.
- HABLEY, W. R., BLOOM, J. L., ROBBINS, S., & ROBBINS, S. B. **Increasing persistence: Research-based strategies for college student success**. John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
- OPPELT, Camila Q. Interview with Dr. Elizabeth Palacios. Personal archives. 2014.
- _____. **Keep Going Ahead: The Case of Student Employment and Academic Success at Baylor University**. Available at: <<https://blogs.baylor.edu/hesabaylorhistoryproject/keep-going-ahead/>>. Accessed on: 18 nov. 2018.
- THELIN, J. R., GASMAN, M. Historical overview of American higher education. **Student services: A handbook for the profession**, n. 4, p. 3-22, 2003.
- TINTO, Vincent. Research and practice of student retention: what next?. **Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice**, v. 8, n. 1, p. 1-19, 2006a.
- _____. **The assessment of student retention programs**. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, School of Education. Available at: <<http://www.yorku.ca/retentn/rdata/assessingretention.pdf>>. Accessed on: 13 jun. 2017.
- VENDITUOLI, M. Data-analysis programs that help retain students are gaining traction at colleges. **The Chronicle of Higher Education**. Available at: <<http://chronicle.com/article/Data-Analysis-Programs-That/148311/>>. Accessed on: 29 jun. 2017.
- WINTERER, C. The Humanist Revolution in America, 1820–1860: Classical Antiquity in the Colleges. **History of Higher Education Annual**, n. 18, p. 111-130, 1998.

Recebido em: 25/11/2018

Aceito em: 15/04/2021