

Retention and College Counseling Centers

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Students with personal problems and psychological issues often struggle academically and are at risk for dropping out of school. Counseling has been shown to address these issues while having a positive impact on students remaining in school. Students who make use of counseling stay in school at a higher rate when compared to those who do not use counseling services.

There is a good deal of literature on the relationship between students' utilization of counseling services and the corresponding retention rate of these students. This article reviews three key findings and explores ways counseling centers should approach retention issues.

1. Students with social and emotional problems are at risk for dropping out.

In their longitudinal assessment, Turner and Berry (2000) found that one in five of those students attending counseling was considering withdrawing from the university as a result of personal problems. They found that 70 percent of the students who attended counseling reported their personal problems had an impact on their academic performance.

Several studies (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Bray, Braxton, & Sullivan, 1999) have examined the predication of a student dropping out based on socio-emotional adjustment problems. They found these problems predicted as well as, or better than, academic adjustment for freshmen students. Students who drop out of college often have socio-emotional problems that could be well addressed by proactive counseling services.

2. Students in counseling have a higher retention rate than those who are not.

Turner and Berry (2000) report a retention rate of 85 percent for students involved in counseling compared to 74 percent for the general student body. Wilson, Mason, and Ewing (1997) found a 14 percent retention advantage for students who received counseling over a control group of students who were either placed on a waitlist or did not attend their counseling appointment. This study was replicated at Southern Illinois University in 2001. Dr. Tylka found counseling students had a 25 percent graduation rate over those students who did not receive counseling.

Ilovsky (1997) examined freshmen students during their first semester and then again two semesters later. Students who attended counseling had a retention rate of 75 percent compared to 68 percent of the general student population. Frank and Kirk (1975) conducted a five-year study with 2,400 Berkeley students in which they found higher graduation rates for students who received counseling or psychiatric services.

3. Counseling helps students address their difficulties and remain in school.

Several studies (Bishop & Walker, 1990; Weiss & Giddan, 1986; Campbell, 1995) identify the positive impact of counseling services for students identified as retention risks. Bishop and Brenneman (1986) examined college students who sought counseling because they were

considering dropping out of school or worried about failing. They found that 86 percent of these students enrolled for at least another semester.

Clark, Wettersten, and Mason (1999) reported that students who participated in counseling had positive changes measured in their quality of life satisfaction—a more predictive measure of student retention than GPA alone. Campbell (1965) found a direct relationship between academic success and counseling participation.

How should counseling centers approach retention?

Retention for retention's sake cannot be a counseling center's prime directive. If students are disruptions to the college community or unhappy about their choice to go to college, it may be best for these students to leave school. Likewise, there may be times when the removal of a particular student is better for the overall retention goals of the university.

Each college must develop retention goals that take into account high-risk students, who require extra services, and those disruptive students whose removal from school would have a positive impact on the remaining community. A 100 percent retention goal is neither desirable nor achievable.

An individual student's negative behaviors can have an enormous impact on a college. Kitzrow (2003) documented the tendency for mental health problems to significantly interfere or impair the ability of students to function in an academic environment. This impairment rarely occurs in a vacuum and often impacts other students' academic performance.

As Rummel, Acton, Costello, and Gillan (1999) remarked, "A University does not want to retain students who are not academically suited for their environment" (p. 243). While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires colleges to protect students' rights and provide reasonable accommodations for them to be successful, there are times where a student's behavior should be seen within the context of the good of the greater community.

While research evidence supports the positive role of counseling on retention, this data should not be the only measure of evaluating counseling service's effectiveness (Sharkin, 2004). The main purpose of counseling centers is not to keep students enrolled, though they still need to take an active role in assessing retention and attrition issues. Retention assessment should be viewed as a positive outcome of their services.

The role of outcome surveys

Many counseling centers have addressed this area within their outcome surveys. UNLV Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) director Dr. Jamie Davidson included the following questions on their intake form: "Are you considering dropping out of school?" and "If yes, to what degree are the issues that brought you to counseling contributing to your thoughts of dropping out?".

Questions were scored on a 1 to 5 likert scale with the scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much.” His associate director, Dr. Ann Shanklin, found that those who endorsed these questions at a high level, putting them at risk for dropping out, were retained in the 86–98 percent level.

While retention is not always considered a central issue for counseling directors and psychologists, further exploration of the relationship between counseling and retention should be considered—particularly when this could be assessed through simple additions to existing outcome questionnaires. This data could be used to bolster the importance of adequate counseling services for today’s college students.

Staffing issues

Given that personal counseling has a positive impact on student retention (Bishop & Walker, 1990; Clark et al., 1999; Illovsky, 1997; Weiss & Giddan, 1986), higher quality counseling programs will have an increasingly positive impact on student retention. Wilson et al. (1997) reported retention rates were highest for students who received at least six sessions of psychological counseling.

Sharkin (2004) suggested counseling centers “collaborate with academic support services; indeed, such collaboration may be particularly effective in retention efforts” (p. 104). Providing an increased number of sessions and encouraging counseling staff to work more collaboratively with other support services will require adequate staffing levels and the corresponding budget to support these efforts.

These higher quality programs should have adequate staff to student ratios (the International Association of Counseling Services suggests 1:1500) and allow staff to provide prevention programming, mental health screenings, and advertising to increase service utilization. Counseling centers must also have adequate budgets to allow for necessary training and support of its existing staff.

Collaborative approach

Retention and attrition issues impact all departments on campus. Counseling centers should track and promote their work in this area to demonstrate both a collaborative approach with other university departments and to advocate for additional staffing and budget to support high-quality programs. As Turner and Berry (2000) wrote, “Counseling centers need to be encouraged to take an active and leading role in assessing the value of their services and their potential contributions to reducing the number of students who leave college due to personal difficulties” (p. 634).

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