Recruiting For Retention: Hospitality Programs

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Abstract

Colleges and universities must take into account the impact the dwindling economy and the increases of tuition will have on college recruitment, and attempt to recruit students for retention. Student retention is fundamental to the ability of a university or college to carry out its mission, and a high rate of student loss is not only a financial problem for students, but a symbolic failure of the school to achieve its goals. Innovation is the key to successfully retaining students and preventing high attrition rates. Hospitality programs have also been challenged both academically and financially in an attempt to provide students with pertinent subject material, viable internship opportunities, and global competencies in the international arena. Most of the schools use a three-pronged approach, the first focusing on academic support solutions and the second focusing on student resource initiatives, and finally on financial support. Attrition is an expensive loss that colleges and universities can no longer afford. Within the past 20 years, most colleges and universities had added retention programs to their strategic planning efforts.

Keywords: Attrition, Bridge program, Retention, Hospitality and Tourism Management

Introduction

The importance of student retention and persistence continues to escalate throughout higher education, and it is particularly acute for those institutions that are tuition-based in striving to reach their annual budget goals. In today's uncertain economy, colleges and universities must buckle down and find what works for today's students and the educational institutions they attend. Financial burdens on academic institutions mean that innovative ways must be found to appeal to students, to encourage them to undertake educational endeavors that will further their own career and financial goals. It does no good to enroll 1,000 students and have only 500 complete their degrees. Attrition costs US educational institutions billions each year. Colleges and universities must do a better job of retaining students.

There are many ways to ensure student retention. One of the most important is to streamline recruiting efforts so retention becomes a part of recruitment efforts. What does this mean? It means that colleges must actively plan for the retention of students. Defending against attrition is of paramount importance, more so now than at any time in the history of US colleges and universities. Student retention is an important factor to maintain a quality hospitality and tourism management program which has to deal with student attrition. "While it appears that a hospitality program can greatly impact overall student satisfaction, there may be little that a program can do,

in isolation, to impact student retention (Wilkinson, p. 50)." As money grows tighter, potential students are carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages of a college education against their own financial burdens. It is up to the institutions to *obtain* new students and *retain existing* ones. Educational institutions must aggressively recruit students who are most likely to complete degrees and they must actively create and promote those programs and facilities which are most likely to result in student retention.

There is no doubt that it costs more to recruit new students than it does to retain already existing students and yet at many universities and colleges the focus remains on recruitment rather than on retention. Many college and university administrators do not view retention as a source of increased funding but the truth of the matter is that if colleges and universities could retain even half of the students they lose through attrition, budgetary increases would be assured with very little increase in spending.

Literature Review

Significant analysis and research on the importance of retention began in earnest in the 1970's and focused primarily on pre-college traits. The work of Vincent Tinto involved the social and academic traits that perspective students brought to higher education and his model of withdrawal considered the degree of fit between individual students and the college or university environment (1975, 1993). The research of (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005) in examining student engagement at exemplary colleges and universities known as (DEEP), Documenting Effective Educational Practice, provides a framework as to what is necessary for student engagement and persistence.
- A "living" mission and "lived" educational philosophy
- An unshakeable focus on student learning
- Environments adapted for educational enrichment
- Clearly marked pathways to student success
- An Improvement oriented ethos
- Shared responsibility for educational quality and student success (p. 24)

These six themes provide a structure for developing specific templates to meet the constraints of cultivating a retention program for the general student population and to meet the specific needs for hospitality and tourism management students and curricula.

There are several ways to foster retention including; developing outreach and bridge programs, orientation and student life classes/programs, academic and social/psychological counseling, participation in academic and social activities, increased on campus housing, and faculty advising (Astin, 1993). Outreach and bridge programs are extremely effective methods that colleges and universities can use to cultivate student retention. Such programs act as a bridge between high school and college; preparing students for their freshman year. A prime example of such a bridge program is the Summer Bridge program at the University of California, San Diego. The program was established 30 years ago and "…is a four-week academic and residential experience designed to prepare incoming freshmen, especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, to successfully transition to UCSD. Approximately 150 UCSD freshmen participate in the program each summer during which they learn and hone important academic, cognitive, social, and leadership skills that will serve them well during their critical first year in college, and beyond." (Dabney, 2003) The cohorts who graduate from UCSD within 5 years who took part in

the program have a remarkable 81% graduation rate. The key to success in such programs is to make sure that they are not simply addressing the remedial needs of students but that they contain content that ensures students enter college with a clear understanding of the difficulties they may experience academically, socially and psychologically and what programs/people they can access when they encounter problems.

Factors that influence retention must be considered when developing a retention plan.
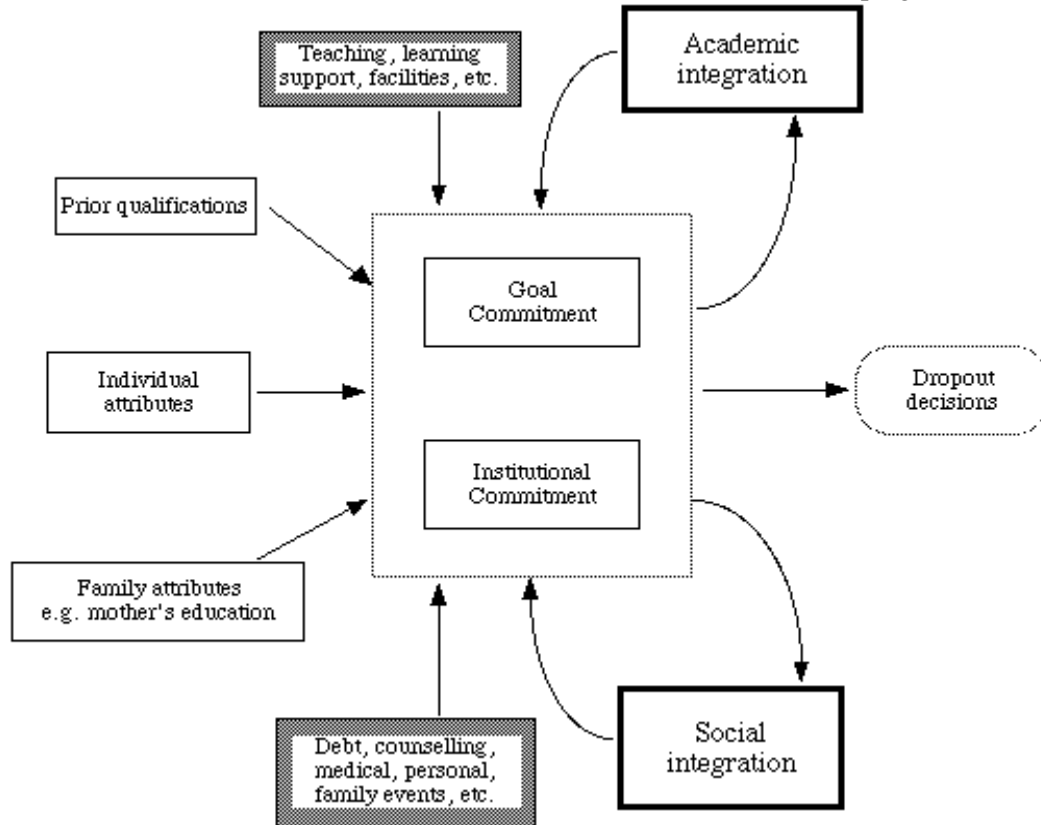
(Draper, 2002)

From the model above you can see that there are many factors that influence whether or not a student will be retained, including; academic integration, social integration, dropout decisions, family attributes, individual attributes, prior qualifications, financial considerations, and teaching/learning support. Since there are so many factors that influence student retention it behooves colleges and universities to develop programs and practices that address as many of these factors as possible. Also, the deductions of Chuang, Goh, Stout & Dellmann-Jenkins concerned with undergraduate students has shown that "understanding the career development process may help hospitality students make a conscious career plan and meaningful commitment, and may help hospitality programs to modify their curricula to better serve students' needs (p.35)."

Orientation and student life programs can help universities and colleges retain students by helping students learn about university life which can be very different from the environment they are used to at home. It has long been known that students in the sciences and engineering are

particularly prone to attrition (Astin, 1993). Kettering University is an example of a university that has recognized this special group of students who are more prone to attrition and instituted a pilot program to stem the tide of students who were leaving without attaining a degree. Their "pilot orientation class ran fall 2006 and spring 2007 for the entire term to provide academic, co-op and non-academic assistance to students. This assistance included up-to-date information on how to prepare for cooperative education assignments; how to interact and communicate with companies and staff; instruction on incorporating better time management skills; more details on health and counseling services available while on campus, and where to go when a student needs help." (Erwin, 2007) The program proved extremely successful with 100% of students retained into their freshman year. Data is not yet available regarding graduation rates.

Faculty advising and the type and duration of student/faculty contact have a direct positive impact on student retention (Astin, 1993, Vivian, 2005). Advising has instantaneous and enduring benefits for individual students. Advising can motivate students to stay in programs during difficult times by providing one on one meaningful out of class contact with faculty. It provides faculty members with the opportunity to encourage, and advise students on academic and career choices fostering a sense of connection that can support a student's stay in an academic program. It is critically important that faculty communicate extensively with their students, making sure that they encourage students and build self-esteem. Faculty who support students provide positive reinforcement and the motivation for student's to persist in college. Despite the importance of advising in relationship to student retention, there is little to no training provided to faculty. This is one area that can be improved in many colleges and universities (Habley and Crockett, 1988). The research of Chuang and Dellmann-Jenkins resulted in three major premises based on their study. First of all, students felt that they exercise the most influence on making decisions affecting their career. Secondly, female students need to be educated on gender-based issues that can be detrimental to their professional development and third, viable internships are necessary as well as realistic expectations for career growth and progress (pp.525-526). **Structured internships** A collaborative effort must be made by industry and educational institutions to ensure that students are placed in quality internships to gain a positive work experience to remain or to seek a position in the hospitality and tourism industry (Richardson).

Recruiting for Retention

Students most likely to complete 4 year degrees typically have the following traits in common; the single largest predictor of persistence is high school GPA followed closely by high SAT Mathematical and Verbal scores, socioeconomic status (father's and mother's educational levels and parental income), and a high leadership self-rating are also important indicators of persistence (Astin, 1993). Findings reached by Wilkinson (n.d.) revealed that the grade point average for a student's first semester has the greatest impact on retention. The success of hospitality students and in general, all students in higher education, rests on their early experiences and support. Also,increased on- campus housing affects retention rates positively. Many universities and colleges require freshman to stay in on campus housing for at least the freshman year and studies have shown (Astin, 1993, Reynolds, 2007) that staying on campus leads to better student retention the following year(s).

Given these traits it would behoove academic institutions to develop plans for the aggressive recruitment of students who are most likely to complete a four year degree program. Financially, retention of students throughout a 4 year degree program means the continued success of colleges and universities in these trying economic times. The motivational factors for students to pursue a HTM degree was examined by (Lee, Olds and Lee n.d,), and uncovered themes that concluded

HTM was interesting and it is a field with strong employment opportunities. The authors maintain that these traits can be incorporated into a program marketing campaign and allow for greater internship possibilities and increased jobs.

 HTM programs are saddled with the same retention, student persistence and attrition problems that other post-secondary programs need to contend with. They also have the ability to contend with "recruiting for retention" with unique initiatives that lend themselves to this discipline. The initial marketing of a program can be generated with a primary course offering open to all students and the reputation it has built up through industry internships and successful alumni (Dodds, Muchnick, 2005)). International students can make up a large proportion of a hospitality and tourism program. These particular students consider the reputation of the institutions to be an important factor in their choice because it can increase employment prospects. These international students are more open to web-based instruction as freshmen and sophomores until they become assimilated into the host country's culture. This assimilation process also includes overcoming language barriers and campus life (Lu and Alder).   Research has shown that a global component is necessary to achieve a competitive parity with hospitality programs throughout the international arena. It appears that the United States is currently lagging behind in this area as evidenced by the lack of an international focus in many programs (Ayoun, Johnson, Vanhyfte and O'Neill, 2010).

Suggestions for Practice

This initial research has shown that general retention concerns are inexorably tied to student persistence and attrition issues in post-secondary hospitality and tourism management programs. The following general recommendations are applicable to both general retention issues in post-secondary education and can also be aimed at specific issues concerning hospitality and tourism management programs. The strongest recommendation involves students updating their graduation plans and career goals every semester with a qualified advisor. This could also include a comprehensive course planning document that would enable students to pursue timely internship possibilities, and an international component for graduation and resume purposes. The number of course offering could be increased that would demonstrate both the institution's and faculty's commitment to promote and continually improve the program. An exit survey could also be administered any time a student leaves the university and HTM program that would allow an ongoing evaluation to better retain students. Additionally, qualified student tutors can be used to prevent drops and withdrawals if used in conjunction with an early intervention program initiated by faculty, advisors and/or counselors.

Conclusions

 "There are several implications of the research for hospitality and tourism educators. Given the changes noted in the importance placed on job factors, there is a need to conduct periodic studies of students to assess what is important. As changing factors are identified, they can be related to the hospitality and tourism industry through course discussions and students can be made more aware of intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards in the industry (Kim, McCleary and Kaufman, p.

9)." The conclusions reached by Mayo and Thomas-Haysbert infer that program outcomes should be based on the needs of all participants in a given program. Accreditation processes are "focusing on assessment of courses and not the program. The methods used to assess course objectives are not the same as assessing program objectives (p. 34)." Specific aims for retaining hospitality and tourism majors begin with targeting at-risk students. These can include first generation students, those with low incoming and current GPA's, persistent dropping and withdrawing from classes, and a general unwillingness to connect to the campus community.

Student retention in hospitality and tourism management programs goes hand-in-hand with the general student population. In-house activities tailore for their specific academic and career goals is a must in developing a successful program. It is evident that a significant piece of the retention equation will be the support of successful alumni, viable internship opportunities, and a knowledgeable faculty and staff. These factors will give the hospitality and tourism management the tools necessary for academic success and timely graduation rate.

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