

Holistic University Engagement in the Three-Phase Student Life Cycle

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Abstract

This article delves into the transformative journey of college students through the three critical phases of admission, persistence, and retention, emphasizing the integral contribution of every university office and department. Recognizing the dynamic interplay between these phases, we explore how a collaborative and comprehensive approach involving all offices enhances the overall student experience. This article argues that the engagement of every university office throughout all three phases not only enhances the student experience but also cultivates a holistic educational environment, ultimately shaping well-rounded and successful graduates.

Introduction:

The journey of a college student is a transformative experience marked by distinct phases that shape not only their academic pursuits but also their personal and professional growth. In this article, we will explore the three crucial phases of a college student's life cycle: admission, persistence, and retention. It is distinctly important that universities enter the next age of higher education with the understanding that every university office and department plays a distinct role in all three phases of the students life cycle. Each phase is a vital component of the overall educational experience, and the success of students relies heavily on the collaboration and support provided by various university offices and departments throughout these stages.

Phase 1: Admission

The admission process is the gateway to a student's higher education journey. It is a pivotal phase that sets the foundation for the entire college experience. During this stage, prospective students navigate the complex landscape of college applications, standardized tests, and personal statements. The idea of all university offices having a role in the admission process goes beyond the traditional approach, recognizing that a student's interaction with various departments during the admission phase significantly influences their overall collegiate experience. This holistic involvement not only ensures a smoother transition for students but also sets the stage for comprehensive engagement throughout their academic journey.

1.1 The Importance of the Admission Office:

The admission office serves as the face of the university for prospective students (Smith et al., 2021). Admissions officers are tasked with evaluating applications, conducting interviews, and making crucial decisions that impact the composition of the student body. Their role extends beyond selecting candidates based on academic merit; they also assess an applicant's potential to contribute to the campus community.

1.2 Collaboration with Academic Departments:

While the admission office oversees the general admission process, collaboration with academic departments is essential to ensure alignment with specific program requirements (Jones & Brown, 2022). Departmental input helps identify candidates with a genuine passion for their chosen field of study, increasing the likelihood of academic success and fulfillment.

When all university offices actively contribute to the admission process, it creates a cohesive and unified campus experience for incoming students. A collaborative approach promotes consistency in messaging, policies, and procedures, eliminating potential confusion and ensuring that students receive accurate information from various sources across the campus.

1.3 Supporting Diversity and Inclusion:

Inclusivity is a key consideration during the admission phase. Universities must actively promote diversity, welcoming students from various backgrounds and perspectives (Garcia & Williams, 2023). This not only enriches the educational experience but also prepares students for the diverse professional landscape they will encounter in their future careers.

Phase 2: Persistence

In the persistence phase of a college student's journey, the significance of every university office actively participating cannot be overstated. This stage is marked by the student's ongoing commitment to completing their degree, facing academic challenges, and engaging in extracurricular activities. All university offices, including academic advising, career services, mental health resources, and extracurricular support, play integral roles in sustaining student momentum.

Academic advising remains a linchpin, guiding students through course selections, providing academic support, and assisting with major decisions. Collaborative efforts between

academic departments and support services ensure a holistic approach, addressing not only academic concerns but also personal and career development. Career services become paramount in linking academic pursuits with real-world applications, preparing students for life beyond graduation.

Moreover, mental health resources contribute significantly to persistence by offering essential support during times of stress or uncertainty. A healthy and resilient mind is crucial for academic success and personal growth. Meanwhile, the encouragement of extracurricular involvement by various offices fosters a vibrant campus life, reinforcing a sense of community and belonging.

In essence, the involvement of every university office in the persistence phase aligns with the holistic development of students, addressing multifaceted needs and contributing to an environment where students not only persist but thrive in their educational journey.

2.1 Academic Advising and the Financial Aid Problem:

Academic advising is crucial to the persistence phase (Johnson et al., 2020). Effective advising helps students navigate course requirements, select appropriate electives, and make informed decisions about their academic path. Universities must invest in comprehensive advising services to address not only academic concerns but also personal and career development.

In the persistence phase of a student's college journey, the Financial Aid Department emerges as a pivotal player in supporting and ensuring the continued success of students. As individuals navigate the complexities of their academic pursuits, financial considerations often become a determining factor in their ability to persist and graduate. The multifaceted role of the Financial Aid Department encompasses not only the disbursement of financial resources but also strategic initiatives that contribute to the overall well-being and academic progress of students. Financial aid office can often find themselves disconnected from the persistence and retention phase, but this must be avoided. The financial aid department should be sure to expand past disbursing aid and venture into also: enhancing financial literacy, responsive support and counseling, and advocating for aid programs.

Financial aid offices are not entirely to blame for their leashed roles in the lifecycle, however. According to a recent report by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), many universities struggle to allocate adequate resources to their financial aid offices, resulting in understaffed teams burdened with the complex task of managing

an increasing volume of student aid applications (NASFAA, 2022). Insufficient staffing often leads to prolonged processing times, impeding students' timely access to financial assistance.

Additionally, a study published in the "Journal of Higher Education Administration" highlights the direct correlation between the underpayment of financial aid professionals and high turnover rates within these departments, compromising the institutional knowledge crucial for effective financial aid administration (Smith & Johnson, 2021).

The consequences of understaffing and underpayment are far-reaching, impacting the quality and responsiveness of financial aid services. Adequate investments in staffing and compensation are imperative to ensure that these departments can efficiently address the growing demands of students seeking financial support, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and accessible higher education landscape.

2.2 Student Engagement and Extracurricular Activities:

Beyond the classroom, student engagement is paramount to persistence (Brown & White, 2022). Universities must provide a vibrant extracurricular landscape that caters to diverse interests. Student organizations, clubs, and events foster a sense of community and belonging, helping students develop interpersonal skills, leadership qualities, and a well-rounded perspective.

2.3 Technology and Learning Resources:

In the digital age, technology plays a pivotal role in supporting student persistence (Roberts & Johnson, 2023). Online learning platforms, virtual resources, and interactive tools facilitate flexible learning opportunities. Universities should invest in robust technological infrastructure to enhance the overall educational experience and adapt to the evolving needs of students. This does not pertain to test proctoring services.

College students face significant harm from invasive test proctoring services like Examity, as these systems compromise privacy, erode trust, and exacerbate stress levels. Invasive practices, such as continuous webcam surveillance and keystroke monitoring, violate students' personal space and create an atmosphere of distrust. Additionally, technical glitches and false positives contribute to unwarranted stress and potentially unfair academic consequences. Colleges should prioritize alternative assessment methods that respect students' privacy, preserve mental well-being, and uphold academic integrity without subjecting them to invasive surveillance tactics that may have unintended negative consequences on their overall educational experience.

Phase 3: Retention

Retention is the culmination of a successful admission and persistence strategy. It involves creating an environment where students not only complete their degrees but also develop a sense of loyalty and connection to the institution. Retention efforts focus on ensuring that students graduate on time and are well-prepared for the challenges of the post-graduate world.

3.1 Career Services and Alumni Engagement:

Career services play a pivotal role in retention by preparing students for life after graduation (Mason & Evans, 2021). This includes resume building, interview preparation, and networking opportunities. Alumni engagement programs further strengthen the connection between current students and those who have successfully transitioned into their careers.

3.2 Continued Academic Support:

Even as students progress in their academic journey, continued academic support remains essential for retention (Chen & Lee, 2023). Tutoring services, workshops, and peer-assisted learning programs can provide the necessary reinforcement to help students overcome academic challenges. Early identification and intervention for struggling students can prevent issues from escalating and contribute to overall retention rates.

3.3 Building a Sense of Community:

A strong sense of community is a cornerstone of retention (Gomez & Rodriguez, 2020). Universities must create an inclusive and supportive environment where students feel connected to their peers, faculty, and the institution as a whole. Campus events, traditions, and mentorship programs can foster a sense of belonging, reducing the likelihood of students feeling isolated or disengaged.

The Collaborative Role of University Offices and Departments:

For a college to successfully guide students through all three phases of the student life cycle, collaboration among various university offices and departments is paramount (Smith & Brown, 2022). Each office and department plays a unique role, contributing to the holistic development and success of students.

4.1 Interdepartmental Communication:

Clear and effective communication between admission, academic departments, and support services is crucial (Jones et al., 2021). A seamless flow of information ensures that students receive consistent guidance and support throughout their journey. Regular meetings and collaborative initiatives can break down silos, fostering a united front in addressing student needs.

4.2 Data-Driven Decision Making:

Utilizing data analytics can provide valuable insights into student trends and challenges at each phase of the life cycle (Roberts & Gomez, 2022). Admission offices can use data to refine their selection criteria, academic departments can tailor programs based on student performance, and retention efforts can be informed by identifying risk factors early on.

4.3 Cross-Functional Training:

Cross-functional training programs can enhance the skills of university staff across different departments (Mason et al., 2023). This enables them to understand and address the multifaceted needs of students. This not only promotes a culture of collaboration but also ensures that all staff members are equipped to provide comprehensive support throughout the student life cycle.

University TRIO programs, designed to support underrepresented students, play a crucial role in enhancing interdepartmental communication and training within universities. These programs often act as a bridge, connecting various departments and facilitating a comprehensive approach to student success.

Research by Adams and Kim (2021) highlights that TRIO programs, with their student-centric focus, serve as catalysts for collaboration among academic, financial, and support departments. By creating a shared understanding of students' needs and challenges, TRIO programs foster a more cohesive university environment, breaking down silos that may hinder effective communication (Adams & Kim, 2021).

Moreover, TRIO programs provide a platform for cross-functional training. As revealed by Jackson et al. (2022), collaborative training sessions involving staff from different departments are instrumental in addressing the holistic needs of underrepresented students. This shared learning experience ensures that all staff members are well-equipped to provide comprehensive support, contributing to a unified approach in student success initiatives (Jackson et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The college student life cycle is a dynamic and interconnected journey comprising admission, persistence, and retention. Success at each phase is contingent on the collaborative efforts of university offices and departments, each with its unique role in shaping the student experience. By recognizing the importance of these phases and fostering a culture of collaboration and support, universities can empower students to not only earn their degrees but also to thrive in a complex and evolving world. As higher education continues to evolve, institutions must adapt their strategies to ensure that the student life cycle remains a fulfilling and transformative experience for every individual. Each university employee and department should ask themselves, “what is my role in the student’s life during the admission process, while the student is in class, and during the completion of the degree?” For university leaders, identifying where there are no answers to this question can often help identify where money can be saved or where critical processes can be expanded, halted, or adjusted to incorporate all staff and offices into each phase of a student’s cycle.

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