2001

Understanding the Organizational Nature of Student Persistence: Empirically-Based Recommendations for Practice

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BAYWOOD REPRINTS

Journal of

COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION

RESEARCH, THEORY & PRACTICE

EDITED BY: DR. ALAN SEIDMAN

Volume 3, Number 1 – 2001-2002

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UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATIONAL NATURE OF STUDENT PERSISTENCE: EMPIRICALLY-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on the assumption that colleges and universities are organizations and subsequently that the organizational perspective provides important insights for improving retention on college and university campuses. A review of existing organizational studies of undergraduate persistence serves as the basis for ten empirically-based recommendations for practice that are designed to help campus leaders improve the effectiveness of retention efforts on campus.

Efforts to better understand undergraduate persistence have been undertaken from a variety of theoretical perspectives—including psychological, environmental, economic, organizational, societal, and interactional. Each perspective provides a unique lens for viewing and understanding student persistence. This article builds on the assumption that colleges and universities are organizations and subsequently that the organizational perspective is an appropriate framework for gaining useful insights into how undergraduate retention can be improved on college and university campuses. More directly, the purpose of this article is to examine existing organizational studies of undergraduate persistence in an effort to identify empirically-based recommendations regarding how knowledge of organizational behavior at colleges can be used to improve student retention on college and university campuses.

While Tinto (1993) has cited the failure of organizational studies to consider individual student motives for withdrawal as the major weakness of this

perspective, there are a number of organizational studies that have incorporated variables that measure aspects of student interaction with the organizational environments on campus. The following critical synthesis will emphasize the findings from these studies, buffered with appropriate findings from related studies, as the foundation for a series of specific recommendations for campus leaders concerned with improving the organizational functioning of their campus with regard to the important issue of undergraduate retention.

The remainder of the article will be organized in five parts. The first part consists of a discussion of how to best understand the concept of organizational behavior as it applies to college and university settings. The second part will be a review of existing organizational studies of undergraduate persistence. This review will be presented in a quasi-historical format. The next section will be a brief synthesis of key findings that emerge from the review of literature. The heart of the article can be found in the fourth section which focuses on specific organizational recommendations for improving undergraduate persistence. The article then concludes with a brief summary.

DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The phrase “organizational behavior,” as it is used in this article, refers to the actions of organizational agents (faculty, administrators, and staff) at a college or university. Therefore, organizational behavior is not used to ascribe action to the institution itself as a social actor. It is important to remember that organizations do not behave; however, the people in those organizations do behave while acting in the service of collective organizational interests.

There is no such thing as one particular theory of organizational behavior. Rather, there are many theories (also called schools, perspectives, traditions, frameworks, paradigms, and models) of organizational behavior (Shafritz & Ott, 1991). There has been a growing recognition in recent years that our understanding of how colleges work is enhanced when different theories or models of organization behavior are integrated into a coherent whole rather than viewing each theoretical perspective as either “right” or “wrong.” This synthesis uses an existing descriptive framework of organizational behavior at colleges, based on the work of Berger (2000), Birnbaum (1988), and Bolman and Deal (1991), for understanding organizational behavior at colleges and universities as a multi-dimensional construct. More specifically, five core dimensions of organizational behavior—bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic—are identified that collectively describe the nature of organizational behavior on campus in a parsimonious, yet comprehensive manner (Berger, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000). Each of the existing models can be thought of as a specific dimension that contributes to the overall understanding of behavior in an organization. All college and university campuses are thought to exhibit aspects of all models of organizational

behavior to some extent, yet each campus varies in the degree to which it fits each dimension (Berger, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988).

The *bureaucratic* dimension emphasizes rationality in organizational decision-making through an emphasis on the use of formal structure manifested in rules, regulations, hierarchy, and goals. The *collegial* dimension describes organizational behavior in terms of collaboration, equal participation, concern for human resources, and the use of consensus to establish goals and make other important decisions. From a *political* perspective, organizational behavior emerges from competition for resources and the existence of varied interests among individuals and groups within an organization. The *symbolic* dimension focuses on the role of symbols (e.g., stories, myths, logos, seals, ceremonies, traditions, artifacts) in creating meaning within organizations. The *systemic* dimension provides an open systems view of the organization which suggests that what happens inside of an organization can be best understood by recognizing how the organizational system, and its component sub-systems, interact with and relate to broader systems in the external environment. These five dimensions of organizational behavior have been described as "building blocks" that define the specific nature of the organizational environment found at any particular college or university campus (Berger, 2000).

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

There is a wealth of empirical and conceptual literature available to help us better understand the organizational nature of the higher education enterprise. However, most of these studies do not focus directly on how organizational behavior at colleges affects students, and even fewer investigate the effects of organizational behavior on student persistence. Instead, most of these studies focus on issues concerning leadership (e.g., Bensimon, 1989; Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Cohen & March, 1974), governance (e.g., Birnbaum, 1988), decision-making (e.g., Chaffee, 1985; Childers, 1981), and effectiveness indicators (e.g., Cameron, 1978, 1986; Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997). Most of the studies listed above look at the organizational processes of leadership, governance, and decision-making as ends in and of themselves. Such organizational processes might also be appropriately thought of as means to the end of promoting better educational experiences and outcomes for students, particularly with regard to degree attainment as an important outcome. Fortunately, there is a small body of literature that provides direct and indirect empirical evidence regarding the effects of organizational behavior on student persistence. Studies that demonstrate such linkages between organizational behavior at colleges and undergraduate persistence are reviewed in the following paragraphs.

Some of the earliest studies on the effects of organizational behavior on student persistence appeared in the early 1970s. Meyer (1970) suggests that the extent to which a college or university can exert effects on students is largely dependent on

the nature of the symbolic relationships between the institution and the external environment. In this work, Meyer (1970) demonstrates that institutions that have a tradition of allocating graduates to higher status occupational roles develop more prestigious social charters. A social charter is defined as the socially-constructed and agreed upon "license" granted to an institution to produce specific types of graduates as the products of the institution. Some charters are more prestigious than others. Colleges with higher prestige have higher retention rates because the degree awarded by that institution has greater symbolic value in the external societal environment.

Kamens (1971, 1974) uses Meyer's (1970) concept of social charter to demonstrate why some institutions have consistently higher persistence rates than do others. Meyer (1970) defines social charter as the "license" that is granted by society to an educational institution to produce a certain type of product. The graduates of colleges and universities are one such product. Kamens (1971) used the concept of charter to explain how greater institutional size and prestige are symbolic indicators of specific types of institutional charters. According to Kamens (1971), the more powerful the charter, as manifested in greater size and prestige, the more an institution is able to influence student commitments and self-concepts. In addition, it is important to note that college charters are also defined by the structural linkages between the institution and specific occupational and employment groups to which students are allocated upon graduation. The stronger such linkages, the stronger the charter, and the stronger effects that an institution can have in attracting and retaining students.

In the earlier study, Kamens (1971) used multi-institutional data to demonstrate how institutions with greater size and complexity, coupled with a superior capacity to place graduates in prestigious social and occupational roles, have lower rates of attrition than do smaller types of postsecondary institutions. He provides an open systems view of organizational behavior in higher education and emphasizes how colleges and universities with highly institutionalized social charters are able to use their elevated role in the field of higher education to exert stronger positive influences on student persistence. In a later work, Kamens (1974) demonstrates how the use of legitimized myths in postsecondary institutional settings helps to reinforce the social charter of an institution, thereby strengthening the ability of an institution to successfully retain students.

The importance of symbolic and systemic elements as sources of organizational influence on rates of student persistence can also be found in the work of Clark, Heist, McConnell, Trow, and Yonge (1972). In a national study, Clark and colleagues (1972) found that colleges and universities possess both environmental potency on campus, which refers to strength of consistency and congruence of patterns of activities and norms that students experience on campus, and image potency, which is defined by the strength of the institution's reputation outside of the campus. It is the interaction of these two types of organizational potencies that helps explain why some campuses have a stronger impact on student outcomes,

including the outcome of degree attainment, than do other campuses. Higher levels of environmental potency are said to exist when the dominant patterns of experiences and norms on campus are consistent and congruent across the institution. Image potency is stronger when the college has a well known reputation for excellence and is widely considered to be prestigious in broader social circles. The concept of image potency is closely associated with Meyer's (1970) concept of social charter.

Clark and colleagues (1972) suggest that image and environmental potency can be found in different combinations on different college campuses. Moreover, they found that these different potency combinations led to different patterns of effects on student outcomes, particularly on persistence. Higher levels of image potency lead to more homogenous student bodies and higher levels of environmental potency lead to more consistent experiences for students at college. As a result, colleges exert stronger uniform effects on student persistence and other outcomes when levels of both image and environmental potency are high. In other words, students are more likely to know what to expect from each other and from the institution and are more likely to persist when a campus has a student body in which there are high levels of shared characteristics and interests among the students (homogeneity that often results from high levels of image potency) and high levels of consistency across campus in terms of institutional expectations activities (indicators of high environmental potency). Although these concepts are pre-date Tinto's (1975) theory and the terminology is different, Clark and colleagues (1972) are describing conditions, in terms of image and environmental potency, which can affect academic and social integration on campus. High levels of image and environmental potency would seem to facilitate academic and social integration; while correspondingly low levels would lead to less homogeneity in terms of peer characteristics and institutional expectations—making academic and social integration less likely for most students. When image and environmental potencies are both low, the students and their experiences are less congruent and persistence becomes less likely.

High image potency and low environmental potency tends to lead to lower persistence rates than does a combination of low image potency and high environmental potency. When there are mismatched levels of image and environmental potency, higher levels of environmental potency appear to be more important in promoting retention than do higher levels of image potency because the low image potency gives students few expectations upon entering college, yet the consistent organizational effects throughout the campus associated with high levels of environmental potency create higher levels of shared experience and meaning, which in turn leads to greater satisfaction and persistence among students (Clark et al., 1972). Conversely, high levels of image potency create strong expectations for students and there is likely to be a letdown when these expectations aren't realized as students encounter a lack of consistency regarding institutional norms and practices that are associated with low levels of environmental potency.

The findings from another early multi-institutional study of the relationship between organizational behavior at colleges and undergraduate student persistence indicates that increased levels of bureaucracy led to increases in college dropout (Blau, 1973). Blau (1973) argues that more highly bureaucratized institutions are less likely to have high retention rates for two reasons. First, he suggests that they are less likely to attract high caliber, academically-oriented students. This tends to negatively affect persistence rates because at entry students are less inclined and committed to persisting to the completion of a undergraduate degree. Second, the impersonal nature of highly bureaucratic institutions has a negative effect on persistence (Blau, 1973).

Findings from Blau's (1973) study contradict the findings from Kamen's (1971) examination of institutional size. Blau's (1973) data indicates that greater institutional size and complexity leads to more reliance on bureaucratic organizational structures and subsequently to lower levels of student persistence at that institution. Conversely, Kamens (1971) suggests that greater institutional size and complexity allow universities to have stronger linkages with wide ranges of occupational and economic groups; such linkages encourage students to persist at those institutions. This apparent discrepancy can be partially resolved through the use of Clark and colleagues' (1972) discussion of environmental potency and image potency. The larger number of structural linkages for allocating students to desired economic and occupational roles that exist between the university as an organization and the larger social environment contribute to the image potency of those institutions. It may also be that the bureaucratic structures also associated with greater organizational size and complexity have negative effects in terms of environmental potency. Hence, larger institutions may have mixed organizational effects on persistence that can be directly attributed to size as an organizational determinant. It could be asserted that greater size and complexity increases structural connections that increase the likelihood of persistence while at the same time increasing internal campus bureaucracy which tends to decrease student persistence as a result of a less personal and more highly routinized campus environment.

The next study to examine the relationship between patterns of organizational behavior and patterns of student persistence comes from Astin and Scherrei (1980), who identify different administrative styles that appear to affect a number of different student experiences and outcomes—including retention. According to the findings from this study, humanistic administrative styles, which are closely related to the collegial dimension of organizational behavior (Berger & Milem, 2000), tend to be positively correlated with student persistence, while the hierarchical administrative styles often associated with bureaucratic functioning exhibit a negative relationship with undergraduate degree attainment (Astin & Scherrei, 1980). These findings suggest that the collegial dimension and the bureaucratic dimension have opposite effects on student persistence. Astin and Scherrei (1980) maintain that high levels of humanistic values in administrative

behavior on campus, an integral part of collegiality (Bensimon et al., 1989; Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1988) lead to a greater concern for student well-being. This concern for student well-being leads to decreased attrition rates. Conversely, a hierarchical approach to administration, a key component of bureaucracy (Bush, 1995), is negatively associated with concern for students, which leads to increased attrition (Astin & Scherrei, 1980).

Student satisfaction with college has also been found to be an important precursor to persistence (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Bean, 1980, 1983). Astin and Scherrei (1980) also found that humanistic administrative styles had positive effects on student satisfaction and hierarchical had negative effects. Interestingly, higher levels of administrative task orientedness, another component of bureaucratic models of organizational behavior (Berger & Milem, 2000) in the administration appear to have positive effects on satisfaction. These findings provide further evidence that bureaucracy appears to have mixed effects on retention rates.

Concepts adapted from organizational studies of worker turnover (Price & Mueller, 1981) have also been applied to undergraduate persistence (Bean, 1980, 1983; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Brier, 1989). Bean (1980, 1983) examines how organizational attributes and reward structures affect student satisfaction and persistence. He finds that student perceptions of organizational routinization, participation, communication, and rewards influence levels of student satisfaction, which in turn affects student persistence. Bean (1983) found that routinization, which is typically associated with bureaucracy (Strange, 1994), negatively affects student satisfaction, but not intent to leave or persistence. This finding may help explain why higher levels of bureaucracy have been found to have mixed effects on student persistence in other studies. Bean (1983) also found that distributive justice, or fairness, and organizational participation have positive effects on satisfaction as a precursor to persistence.

Bean's (1980, 1983) work is instructive because it is the first theoretical model to be empirically tested that examines organizational effects on individual student persistence. Moreover, this work is important because it focuses on how students perceive organizational processes as perceptual precursors to persistence rather than examining campus-wide retention rates as they relate to different organizational structures and styles at the campus level as had been done in previous studies.

Subsequent studies have built on Bean's work. Of particular interest are those studies that have taken the organizational features from Bean's model and used those constructs as the basis for elaborating upon Tinto's (1975) interactional model of undergraduate student persistence. In one such example, Braxton and Brier (1989) investigate the role of student perceptions of organizational communication, participation, and fairness as sources of social integration. Braxton and Brier (1989) find that student perceptions of organizational fairness and participation have significant direct effects on retention at an urban, commuter institution. In a replication of this study at a private, highly selective, research

university, Berger and Braxton (1998) find that three perceived organizational attributes—participation, communication, and fairness—play a role in fostering social integration. These studies (Bean, 1980, 1983; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Brier, 1989) suggest that students are more likely to persist in organizational environments where they perceive that organizational agents, such as faculty and staff, communicate well, keep students informed, and allow for student participation in organizational decision-making.

As stated earlier, Bean's theoretical model places great importance on student satisfaction with college as a key predictor of persistence toward degree attainment. In one recent study, organizational behavior has been shown to have direct and indirect effects on student satisfaction (Berger, 1998). In a study of six private, church-related liberal arts colleges, Berger (1998) finds that higher levels of bureaucratic organizational behavior on campus have positive direct and total effects on satisfaction with academic life on campus. Higher levels of collegiality on campus have positive indirect and total effects on student satisfaction with academic life and with student services. The political dimension appears to have mixed effects as it is negatively associated with campus life and academic satisfaction, but positively related to satisfaction with student services. The symbolic dimension also has positive effects on satisfaction with campus life and with academics.

Some of the studies from the organizational effectiveness literature can also be used to inform our understanding of how organizational behavior at colleges affects student persistence. Cameron and Ettington (1988) developed a model describing four types of organizational culture—hierarchical, clan, adhocracy and market—that describe patterns of organizational behavior on campus and that have been found to be associated with particular types of organizational decision-making (Cameron & Ettington, 1988; Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997). The hierarchical organizational culture is associated with patterns of rational decision-making (Cameron & Ettington, 1988) and is related to the bureaucratic dimension of organizational behavior (Berger & Milem, 2000). The clan variant of organizational culture is found on campuses that are described as being a personal place that is like an extended family and where people share a lot of themselves (Ewell, 1989). It has been suggested that clan-like organizational cultures are found in highly collegial institutions (Berger & Milem, 2000). Adhocracy oriented cultures emphasize entrepreneurship and dynamism, while market organizational cultures are production oriented (Cameron & Ettington, 1988; Ewell, 1989). Both adhocracy and market oriented cultures place high emphasis on external positioning and are closely related to the systemic dimension (Berger & Milem, 2000).

In their initial study into how these different types of organizational culture are related to dimensions of organizational effectiveness at colleges and universities, Cameron and Ettington (1988) found that clan cultures, which are highly collegial, had a positive effect on student satisfaction with college as one dimension of

organizational effectiveness that is known to be related to persistence. Other studies have used the concepts developed by Cameron and Ettington (1988) to measure organizational culture. In one such study, aggregated data on persistence rates in a national study of 320 colleges and universities suggest that higher levels of collegiality-related clan-like behavior enhance student persistence while higher levels of hierarchical bureaucracy negatively affect retention (Ewell, 1989).

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The literature reviewed in the previous section suggests some important themes for thinking about and acting to improve undergraduate persistence from an organizational perspective. The following paragraphs use the multi-dimensional model of organizational behavior, based on the work of Birnbaum (1988) and Berger (2000), described earlier in this article to organize the findings from the review of literature into some meaningful and useful patterns of understanding.

The effects of bureaucratic organizational behavior seem to be less clear than do the effects of the other four—collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic—types of organizational behavior. Most existing empirical evidence suggests that bureaucratic patterns of organizational behavior generally seem to have negative effects on student persistence. Several studies demonstrate a negative relationship between higher levels of bureaucratic functioning and institutional retention rates (e.g., Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Blau, 1973; Ewell, 1989). This pattern of findings suggests that campuses that function in highly bureaucratic manners are likely to have higher attrition rates than similar institutions that are less bureaucratized.

However, there is additional evidence which suggests that the relationship between campus bureaucracy and undergraduate retention may not be quite that simple. Kamens' (1971) study suggests that greater institutional size and complexity, which is typically associated with higher levels of bureaucracy (Blau, 1973; Strange, 1991), may have some positive effects on retention rates. Moreover, higher levels of bureaucratic organizational behavior have been found to be positively associated with certain types of student satisfaction (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Berger, 1998). In turn, student satisfaction has been demonstrated to be a precursor to persistence in Bean's (1980, 1983) work on student persistence. Taken together, the studies described above suggest that higher levels of bureaucracy may lead to higher levels of student satisfaction in college and higher attrition rates. Given that satisfaction has been shown to have positive effects on persistence, the supposition that bureaucracy has a positive effect on one (satisfaction with college) and a negative effect on the other (persistence) seems to be inconsistent with existing theory.

Students seem not to notice bureaucratic organizational behavior, and even take it for granted as an expected part of the college experience, unless it creates a problem for them and/or doesn't work properly (Godwin & Markham, 1996). When bureaucratic mechanisms (e.g., chain of command, rules, policies, and

procedures) are the source of a problem for students, they can have a negative effect on student adjustment to college (Godwin & Markham, 1996). The second problem that bureaucracy may cause for students is that it de-personalizes the college experience (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Strange, 1991), making it potentially more difficult for students to have meaningful contact with faculty and administrators on campus. Hence, institutions that are too highly bureaucratized may inhibit interpersonal contact with faculty and administrators, which in turn is likely to impede the development of social and academic integration for students.

It may be that the relationship between levels of bureaucratic behavior on campus on student persistence is not linear. Certain levels of bureaucracy may be necessary in order for the institution to effectively function and may be lead to increased student satisfaction and may even have positive benefits in terms of the institution's ability to retain students. The idea that certain levels of bureaucracy are necessary for organizational efficiency is well established in existing literature on organizational behavior in higher education (Berger & Milem, 2000; Bush, 1995; Strange, 1991). Some of the hallmarks of bureaucracy include providing clearly identifiable goals and expectations for organizational members and providing fair and just procedures for conducting organizational business. Given that other studies (e.g., Bean, 1980; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Brier, 1989) have found that favorable student perceptions of organizational communication and fairness are positively associated with persistence; it may indeed be the case that certain levels of bureaucracy contribute positively to an institution's capacity for promoting undergraduate persistence. It may also be that the effect of bureaucratic patterns of organizational behavior on persistence become increasingly negative as levels of bureaucracy become increasingly higher past some threshold. While some level of bureaucratic organizational behavior appears to be necessary for student persistence, it appears that more is not always better.

Existing evidence suggests that higher levels of collegial organizational behavior on campus have positive effects on student satisfaction (Berger, 1998; Cameron & Ettington, 1988) and on student persistence (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Ewell, 1989). Moreover, three key variables (fairness, communication, and participation) used in studies by Bean (1980, 1983), Braxton and Brier (1989), and Berger and Braxton (1998) can be appropriately thought of as components of collegial behavior. Hence, it may be that the description of this particular pattern of interaction between students and organizational behavior at their institutions may reflect a situation in which some campuses extend collegial behavior to include students to some extent. It may also be that modeling collegiality on these campuses positively benefits student persistence; or it may be that institutions with high levels of collegiality provide a more caring and humanistic environment for students (Astin & Scherrei, 1980). Regardless, students who perceive the elements of collegiality to be present on campus seem more likely to persist.

Limited evidence and indirect evidence (e.g., Berger, 1998) suggests that highly politicized campus environments have negative effects on student satisfaction,

which may lead to decreases in student persistence. Evidence regarding the effects of highly political organizational behavior on other types of outcomes at college and university campuses provides indirect indications that highly politicized campuses may not be conducive to student retention efforts. For example, it has been demonstrated that organizationally competitive campuses (defined as institutions with higher levels of organizational behavior, coupled with lower levels of collegial behavior) have lower rates of student involvement in co-curricular activities. This may be further indication that higher levels of political organizational behavior may negatively affect persistence given that involvement in co-curricular activities has been shown to be a positive predictor of undergraduate persistence (Astin, 1985; Berger & Milem, 2000; Milem & Berger, 1997). The apparent connection between higher levels of political behavior on campus and higher attrition rates may not indicate a causal relationship. It may be that institutions with scarce resources are more likely to be highly political as individuals and coalitions compete for those limited resources (Birnbaum, 1988); and that high undergraduate attrition is a result of resource scarcity rather than the result of political behavior within the organization. Clearly, more empirical evidence is needed before we can be confident regarding the nature of effects of political behavior on student persistence.

High levels of symbolic organizational behavior on campus appears to be associated with higher persistence rates on campus (e.g., Clark et al., 1972; Kamens, 1971, 1974). Highly symbolic behavior appears to contribute to higher levels of shared meaning among students with regard to institutional values and expectations. How students make meaning within the context of an institution's values and goals is an important consideration in the development of academic and social integration of students. Tinto (1993) emphasizes the importance of integration as being at least partially dependent on individual students' ability to find and adopt the norms and behavioral patterns of the campus environment. It seems that there is a logical and consistent connection between the extent to which colleges and universities create shared meaning through the use of symbolic behavior and the extent to which students are able to discover and adopt the values and norms embedded within that symbolic behavior.

Systemic aspects of organizational behavior on campus clearly have important effects on student persistence. The Kamens' studies from the 1970s discussed earlier in the chapter clearly demonstrate the importance of institutional connections, structural and symbolic, to the broader external environment. Kamens' research suggests that structural connections, such as the ability of a college or university to successfully allocate students to particular careers, professions, and graduate schools, enhance the ability of the institution to attract and retain students. In turn, such structural connections help facilitate a positive external image for the institution. A college or university's image or reputation is an important symbolic resource and connection to the external environment. The importance of symbolic connections to external constituencies as a positive

influence on the retention of undergraduates is also emphasized in the work by Clark et al. (1972). Like Meyer's (1970) concept of social charter, the conceptualization of image potency (Clark et al., 1972) also emphasizes the powerful role that symbolic connections to external systems play in creating higher retention rates on campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are derived from the pattern of findings described above and reflect suggestions through which colleges and universities as organizations can use knowledge gained from organizational studies related to student persistence to improve undergraduate retention on their campuses. These recommendations include:

1. Provide students with information and clear lines of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures.

The studies by Bean (1980, 1983) and Berger and Braxton (1998) indicate that students are more likely to persist when they believe that the institution does a good job of communicating expectations; including academic policies, social policies, graduation requirements, and course requirements. Institutions interested in promoting this type of communication should establish and maintain open lines of communication through the use of published materials (e.g., student handbooks, course catalogs, newsletters, memos, and syllabi), campus symbols (e.g., ceremonies and rituals), and even electronic media (e.g., Internet and e-mail). From an organizational perspective, this means using bureaucratic structures, meaningful symbolism, and collegially-based personal contact. Campus leaders at highly political campuses may need to make sure that information gets communicated rather than manipulated as a source of power. Campuses with higher levels of political activity generally have goals that are less clear, indifference is more common, and various individuals and interest groups tend to try and control information (Birnbaum, 1988). These features of political organizational behavior make clear communication of expectations to students and other campus constituencies rather uncertain. Hence, institutional leaders at highly political campuses who are concerned about retention may want to pay particular attention to how well organizational expectations are being communicated to students.

2. Provide opportunities for students to participate in organizational decision-making.

The same studies mentioned in recommendation #1 also suggest that one way to be pro-actively responsive to student needs and concerns is to make sure that there are formal and informal ways for students to be involved in decision-making on campus. Participation in decision-making should occur in a variety of ways. Campus-wide, this may mean ensuring appropriate levels of student representation on committees at a variety of levels. Such representation should help provide students a genuine voice in decision-making. Students can also be

provided opportunities for involvement in decisions about the development and enforcement of academic and social rules on campus, in the planning of their academic programs, and in the development of course expectations and assignments.

Providing students with meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making as a means for improving retention makes sense from several different organizational perspectives. Given what is known about the effects of bureaucratic behavior on undergraduate persistence, providing formal mechanisms for students to participate in decision-making may help attenuate some of the impersonal effects that bureaucracies tend to exert on individuals. Higher levels of collegial organizational behavior appear to be positively related to persistence. Therefore, it may be beneficial for students to experience and participate on official campus committees and in other collegial efforts in which decisions are reached largely through consensus-building processes. It may be particularly important for students to have a voice in decision-making on highly political campuses as a means for making sure that their concerns and issues are able to be raised and addressed among the variety of agendas being pursued by various campus constituencies and stakeholders. Additionally, specifying formal roles for students in campus decision-making processes is a good symbolic gesture signifying the importance of students on campus. Finally, student participation in organizational decision-making provides a systemic link between students and organization while ensuring that there are automatic feedback loops for getting information to and from students within the campus system.

3. Provide a campus environment characterized by fairness toward students.

Fairness is another organizational attribute that appears to be an important positive influence on student persistence at a wide variety of campuses (Bean, 1980, 1983; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Brier, 1989). Students are more likely to persist if they perceive that the enforcement of academic and social rules, awarding of scholarships, grading, and other organizational policies and procedures are done fairly. This finding suggests that policies and procedures that clearly specify expectations and are based on impartial criteria (both hallmarks of bureaucratic behavior) may be important for creating a better climate for student persistence on campus. The importance of fairness within the institution may also provide another piece of the puzzle in explaining why higher levels of political organizational behavior, in which fairness often gives way in lieu of negotiation and brokered deals, may have negative effects on undergraduate retention.

4. Provide balance between structure and responsiveness.

While a well-defined structure and clear goals are essential to developing better persistence rates on campus, empirical evidence suggests that there can be too much of a good thing. The mixed effects of bureaucratic organizational behavior on student persistence suggest that a certain amount of structure is needed to help ensure that expectations are clear, lines of communication exist, and procedures are done fairly. However, it seems that an over-emphasis on bureaucratic

mechanisms may have negative effects and limit an institution's ability to be responsive to students and their changing needs (Godwin & Markham, 1996). Hence, bureaucratic tendencies need to be moderated on college campuses so that they provide enough structure to be supportive of students, but not so pervasive that they become a source of challenge rather than a source of support for students.

5. Actively engage students in political activity on campus.

Political behavior will always occur on college and university campuses and, despite widely-held beliefs to the contrary, political organizational behavior is essential in any thriving organization (Berger & Milem, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988). However, it appears that as levels of political organizational behavior rise, so may levels of student attrition. While more research is needed to fully understand the relationship between political organizational behavior and student persistence, there are strategies that may help campus leaders use aspects of political behavior to their advantage in retaining students. For example, apathy and non-involvement, conditions that are strong predictors of attrition (Astin, 1985), are often common in political organizations (Birnbaum, 1988). At first glance, the relationship between high levels of political behavior and high levels of non-involvement appears problematic for institutions looking to improve student persistence. However, this can also be seen as an opportunity for recognizing the need to get students involved. Birnbaum (1988) notes that people become involved in organizational politics when they have a recognized and vested interest in doing so. Hence, campus leaders interested in improving persistence when levels of political organizational behavior are high would do well to find ways to promote student involvement in important campus issues. This strategy, through the promotion of student involvement in campus life, could have positive effects on student persistence and other outcomes (Astin, 1985). Student involvement in campus issues may also lead to a greater feeling of empowerment, which has been demonstrated to have positive effects on student persistence (Giordano, 1992; Tatum & Rasool, 1996). Opportunities for involvement in multiple ways around multiple issues not only empower individuals and groups within a political system, but also provides mechanisms that prevent deeper conflicts on campus (Birnbaum, 1988), which may be an advantage in retaining students.

6. Provide students with advocates.

It has also been suggested that, because political behavior is present at varying levels on all college and university campuses, there should be some sort of system in place to make sure that there are organizational agents, faculty members and/or staff, who explicitly serve as advocates for students (Berger, 1998). Such advocacy can be done very formally by having an ombudsman's office or more informally through the work of individual faculty members and student affairs administrators. Student advocacy is something that should be a direct concern of the enrollment management team on campus, whether it be an administrative division or a campus committee. Student advocacy could also be particularly important in the retention of traditionally under-represented groups on campus

who may tend to have had less of a voice and presence on campus. Hence, institutions would be well advised to have well developed support and advocacy systems in place for these groups of students.

7. Build shared meaning through authentic symbols that are used with integrity.

The development of shared meaning through the use of symbolic organizational behavior appears to have positive effects on persistence. As it was suggested earlier in this article, academic and social integration depend heavily on students being able to identify and understand the goals, values, and expectations of the college in order to incorporate appropriate norms and patterns of behavior into their own lives as part of the integration process. The appropriate use of authentic organizational symbols that convey the embedded values of the institution to all constituents, particularly students, facilitates shared meaning, which in turn facilitates socialization and integration into the academic and social sub-systems of campus. Organizational symbols have also been shown to be an effective means of increasing communication throughout the organization as higher levels of shared meaning increase the ability of people in different parts of the organization and with different roles within the organization to understand and share information with each other (Bush, 1995). Shared meaning is particularly important given the anarchical nature of most colleges and universities (Birnbaum, 1988). It is also important to remember that symbols only create shared meaning when they are used with integrity and authentically represent actual college values and not contrived manipulations of political agendas on campus (Bush, 1995).

It is also important to remember that not all symbols mean the same thing to all people. It has been suggested that symbolic behavior and meaning in organizations are not always widely shared, or integrated, throughout the organization (Martin, 1992). Each campus has sub-cultures that may engage in and understand symbolic behavior in their own ways; in such cases symbols and the meaning that is attached to them becomes differentiated across the groups. Meaning can also be fragmented at the individual level (Martin, 1992). The fact that the interpretation of symbolic behavior on campus is often integrated, differentiated, and fragmented on any one campus means that campus leaders need to pay attention to how symbols are interpreted and how meaning is made on campus. If the integration really is largely, or even somewhat, dependent on shared meaning as Tinto (1993) implies, then those charged with responsibility for enrollment management on campus need to be aware of how symbols are being interpreted and need to examine to what extent integration, differentiation, and fragmentation is occurring among students as they make meaning out of organizational symbols. This may be particularly important for students from diverse cultural backgrounds who have been traditionally under-represented in higher education and who may construct meaning in ways that are less congruent with dominant modes of meaning making on campus. First-generation college students who are less aware of and knowledgeable about traditional academic norms and symbols may also be less

likely to easily interpret traditional patterns of symbolic organizational behavior on campus.

8. Pay attention to structural and symbolic connections with the external environment.

Most efforts to improve retention on campus look inward to what is happening inside the organization. Some of the literature reviewed in this article suggests that improving retention may require campus leaders to look at their connections to the external environment. Resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), a major strand of open systems theory that focuses on the nature of environmental influence on organizations, suggests organizational success is ultimately dependent on the ability of an organization to acquire necessary resources. Students are in many ways the most important resource for any college or university (Chaffee, 1985).

The ability of any postsecondary educational organization to acquire and retain students as resources is dependent upon both structural and symbolic linkages between organization and environment. Structural connections with future employers and graduate/professional schools have been shown to be potentially important influences on the ability of an institution to retain undergraduate students (Kamens, 1971), as are symbolic connections, in terms of image and reputation, with external constituencies (Clark et al., 1972; Kamens, 1974). Campus leaders can construct foundations for the development and/or maintenance of positive external images and reputations by promoting highly potent educational environments on campus and by effectively using symbols to build higher levels of shared meaning with internal and external constituents. Birnbaum (1988) also suggests that colleges and universities can more effectively interact with and build connections with the external environment by developing cybernetic feedback loops and sensing units to monitor important environmental connections. Systematic awareness of key aspects of the external environment will enable colleges and universities to develop better structural and symbolic connections with key external constituencies, including prospective students, potential donors, and future employers of graduating students.

9. Understand the nature of the organizational environment on campus.

The findings from this review of literature suggest that different patterns of organizational behavior on campus do indeed have effects on the retention of undergraduate students. Awareness that different dimensions of organizational behavior can affect student retention should prompt campus leaders to become more cognizant of and intentional about the patterns of organizational behavior found on their campuses. The Survey of Organizational Dimensions (Berger, 1997) and section five of the Assessment of the Performance of Colleges and Universities Survey developed by the Organizational Studies program of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (Ewell, 1989) are both existing instruments that could be useful to institutional leaders interested in assessing the nature of the organizational environments on their campuses.

10. Assess student perceptions of organizational behavior on campus.

The examination of student persistence from an organizational perspective assumes that students are members of the postsecondary educational organization they attend. As organizational members, their perceptions of the organizational environment on campus are just as real and important as any of the objective measures discussed above and just as important as the organizational perceptions of faculty and administrators. Far too many existing studies of organizational effectiveness have relied on faculty and administrator perceptions of the organizational environment as measures of student satisfaction and achievement. Hence, institutional researchers should pay attention to how students perceive their campus as an organization and should use the data collected in those assessments to help guide organizational policy and practice as a means for improving student persistence.

CONCLUSION

This article draws attention to the fact that colleges and universities are organizations and, as such, the patterns of organizational behavior within them have important consequences for the retention of undergraduate students. Hopefully, greater awareness about the organizational nature of student persistence can help campus leaders be more intentional about the patterns of organizational behavior they engage in as they fulfill their professional roles. In becoming more intentional about the ways in which they act on behalf of the organization, campus leaders can become more intentional about the ways in which the campus organizes for better retention of valuable organizational members-students.

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