Learner Satisfaction and Success

Professional Learning Community
Southern Oregon University
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Executive Summary: Learner Satisfaction and Success PLC

There is a crisis of public confidence in higher education over whether universities adequately support students for success during and after college. Bearing in mind SOU's strategic goal to create a diverse, equitable and inclusive learning community, our PLC explored *why some students leave SOU before completing their degrees and how we can increase persistence, graduation rates and post-college success.*

SOU's Retention (70%) and Graduation (40%): SOU's rates are somewhat lower than comparable institutions nationally and regionally (e.g., Western Oregon) despite a significant increase in our graduation rate over the last decade. Our Black, Hispanic, and Native American students have significantly lower graduation rates, representing a nationwide "equity gap."

Barriers to Success: Students' lack of academic preparation, social integration, and clarity of purpose undermines persistence when faced with organizational and environmental challenges (e.g., an exclusionary campus climate, university bureaucracy, college costs, family issues, and work obligations). This is especially true among students of color, first-generation students, and nontraditional learners.

Belonging: When students feel welcome on campus, believe that they belong in college, and receive support when needed, they are more likely to retain and graduate. A campus climate that builds an inclusive community is crucial for the success of all students, including historically underrepresented groups.

Academic Engagement: When students are engaged intellectually, believe in the value of higher education, and have specific career goals, they are more likely to persist and graduate. High impact practices that support academic engagement include first-year experiences, research, service learning, and capstone projects.

Post-College Success: Student satisfaction surveys indicate that career exploration and planning during college is correlated with persistence and degree completion. Best

practices for the college-to-career transition include career networking, fieldwork, practicums, internships, and work experience.

Support Programs: Pre-College Youth Programs, SOU Bridge Program, Success at Southern/TRiO, and McNair Scholars exemplify successful efforts to recruit, support, mentor, and prepare at-risk students for college and post-graduate success.

Data Analytics: Other universities have improved student success using Navigate (EAB) to identify at-risk students and facilitate academic advising. Frequent surveys of student satisfaction and academic engagement are best practices.

Reframing Success: SOU has the highest outgoing transfer rate among Oregon's public universities, and the state's funding mechanism rewards completion. Many outgoing transfer students are "success stories," the result of faculty and advisors helping them to clarify their goals and find a clear pathway to graduation. We may need to communicate that story better to help policymakers understand the value of our impact on student success.

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Learner Satisfaction and Success

This report reviews recent research on learner satisfaction and success in higher education at the national level, and it considers the SOU experience in that light, based on the available evidence from our university, both anecdotal and systematic. Key questions focused our review: What does the literature suggest about persistence and barriers to college completion? What can we learn from students about their experience pursuing higher education goals at SOU? What can we learn from other universities that have higher retention and completion rates and that do more to prepare students for post-college success? How can these insights enable SOU to fulfill our goal of being a diverse, equitable and inclusive campus that more effectively educates all aspiring learners who seek higher education?

Success and Satisfaction in Higher Education

Key Indicators of Success: Persistence and Completion Rates

Each year, SOU retains approximately 70% of its first-time, full-time degree-seeking students; this rate has fluctuated slightly over the past decade but has not changed significantly and represents the experience of our most recent, Fall 2017 to Fall 2018 cohort, of whom slightly less than 70% were retained (SOU Fact Book, 2018). There are variations in retention rates among SOU's undergraduates: in-state resident, male, first-generation, Black, Native American, and multiethnic students are somewhat less likely to persist year-to-year (SOU Institutional Research, 2019). By comparison with regional schools, SOU's retention rate is lower than UO and OSU but similar to PSU, WOU, EOU, and OIT; significantly, more students transfer from SOU than all of these other 4-year public universities (College Tuition Compare, 2019).

SOU's six-year graduation rate has increased steadily and substantially over the past decade, from 31% graduation with the 2004 (2010 graduation) cohort to 40% with the 2012 (2018 graduation) cohort (SOU Office of Institutional Research, 2018). Notably, select student groups graduate at lower-than-average rates: male (37%), first-generation (35%), in-state resident (35%), Pell grant recipient (32%), Hispanic (32%), Black (26%), and Native American (17%) (SOU Office of Institutional Research, 2019).

What does satisfaction and success look like to our constituents? Most college students want a degree that will improve their job outcomes. Employers want college graduates with skills, knowledge, and dispositions that cut across majors. And, civic leaders want colleges and universities to more efficiently prepare all learners to be productive and engaged citizens. These measures of success can be seen in student persistence and degree completion rates, but measures of intellectual

growth are also significant. Without all three, students cannot reap the benefits of higher education.

Academic Engagement and Student Success

Academic engagement also plays a role in student success, and some indicators of academic engagement have been positively correlated with other measures of students success (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). In their attempts to correlate academic assessment with student success, many studies use grade point average (GPA) and graduation rates as stand-ins for "success"—higher GPA equaling greater student success, and higher numbers of four and six-year completion rates also equaling greater student success (Sulea, van Beek, Sarbescu, Virga, & Schaufeli, 2015; Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015; Randall Johnson & King Stage, 2018). Since both GPA and graduation rates can be analyzed quantitatively, and since both are easily analyzed across entire institutions, they can be useful when analyzing the relative benefits brought by institution-wide academic initiatives. Nevertheless, it bears mention that these sorts of metrics do not consider other measures of academic success such as student learning outcomes; the picture they are capable of telling must always be to some degree incomplete.

Student engagement is a little harder to quantify, but recent studies have also pointed to its integral role in academic achievement and student success (Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015). In some cases, student engagement studies have looked at academic engagement indicators, such as those developed by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), in order to determine whether or not academic programs are engaging students either cognitively, emotionally, or both (Randall Johnson & King Stage, 2018). In other cases, engagement has been more closely aligned with student satisfaction and with psychological factors than with academic indicators (Pelletier et al., 2017; Sulea, van Beek, Sarbescu, Virga, & Schaufeli, 2015).

Although some studies have shown that student engagement is highly correlated with higher GPA and higher graduation rates (Trowler & Trowler, 2010), other studies have also shown that psychological factors and individual life circumstances often affect those numbers more than academic indicators (Pelletier et al., 2017; Antaramian, 2017). For example, engagement itself can be negatively influenced by anxiety and frustration, which reduce motivation and therefore negatively affect engagement and persistence (Kahu, Stevens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are certain academic engagement indicators that do have a strong correlation with student success measures such as graduation rates. Among these are practices such as student research that have proven strongly correlated with higher graduation rates, particularly for smaller, less

selective universities (Randall Johnson & King Stage, 2018).

SOU Students and Academic Engagement

For the 2018 NSSE Survey, Southern Oregon University (SOU) students were surveyed and then compared to students from other colleges and universities in the same Carnegie class, to students at other COPLAC institutions, and to students at SOU peer institutions (NSSE, 2018). For most academic challenge indicators analyzed in this survey, SOU first-year students were on par with those in these three comparison groups. “Higher order thinking” was one of the exceptions to this generalization, and in this category we lagged behind our peers. First-year students also scored generally better than students in the three comparison groups when asked questions about the quality of campus interactions. Average scores for seniors were lower than comparison groups across all engagement indicators except “reflective and integrative learning” and “quality of [campus] interactions” (pg. 7). The weakest areas of engagement for SOU students appeared to be higher order thinking, learning strategies, and quantitative reasoning. Senior SOU students scored significantly lower than students in comparison groups to most questions in these areas and also scored lower than first-year SOU students to questions in these areas. SOU seniors also scored lower to questions about collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others than first-year SOU students and students from comparison groups. Both first year and senior SOU students scored lower than students from comparison groups on many questions relating to the supportive environment of the university. Low scores in quantitative reasoning become even more marked when compared to students in the top 50% and the top 10% schools overall.

The NSSE numbers show that we have room for improvement in particular areas of academic engagement, but also that there is a significant drop in engagement between first year students and senior students. Even if there are other factors that influence graduation rates as much or more than academic engagement, there is still something happening between freshman and senior year that causes students to become less engaged in their academic endeavors. Higher order learning, quantitative reasoning, and academic support were all areas where the engagement indicators of SOU students were lower than those of students in comparison groups. If we believe that higher academic engagement scores would correlate with higher retention rates, and/or higher satisfaction and success ratings, then these might be areas worthy of attention.

Motives for Pursuing Higher Education

The motives students have for pursuing higher education highlight the areas that might be key to improving retention. While students pursue higher education for many reasons, the primary motivation reported in surveys is a desire to improve

work opportunities. In a recent Harris Poll of U.S. residents without degrees preparing to enroll in college, the top three reasons that respondents provided for pursuing higher education all related to employment: “to improve my employment opportunities (91%); “to make more money” (90%); and “to get a good job (89%) (Fishman, 2015). Similarly, a nationally representative Gallup and Strada Education Network study found that “58% of education consumers say that getting a good job is their primary motivation [for choosing higher education], compared with 23% who report a general motivation to learn more and gain knowledge without linking it to work or career aspirations” (2018, p. 2); this pattern was reflected across demographic subgroups. The study also found that the key factors influencing students’ college selection are location, access, and affordability.

A related study found that college students lack confidence in their readiness to launch careers, with only one-third of students reporting that they “believe they will graduate with the skills and knowledge to be successful in the job market (34%) and in the workplace (36%)” (Strada Education Network, 2017, p. 6). The study found that advising had a significant impact on students’ perception of career readiness; students who reported that they spoke often with faculty or staff about career options were more likely to express confidence in their job prospects, but 4 in 10 students, nationally, report that they have never visited their school’s career services office. In particular, Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and older students are more likely to rate career guidance as very helpful in achieving their goals (p.18).

Recent surveys find that employers value college degrees but find that many college graduates lack valued skills and knowledge. According to a survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2018), 80% of business executives and hiring managers believe that a college degree is important, nearly 90% believe that a college degree is worth the investment, and 63% expressed confidence in colleges and universities (vs. 45% confidence rates among the American public in general). The study also found that business executives and hiring managers placed a high priority on graduates’ demonstrated proficiency in skills and knowledge that cut across majors. The college learning outcomes rated highest by both groups were “oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, written communication, and the real-world application of skills and knowledge” (p. 3). However, employers see recent college graduates as underprepared in the skills and knowledge areas that they deem most important.

Hiring decisions may increasingly hinge on the demonstration of skills through such means as micro-credentialing. A study conducted by Northeastern University’s Center for the Future of Higher Education noted that while 75% of U.S. employers still value educational credentials, 55% believe that micro-credentials are “likely to diminish the emphasis on degrees in hiring over the next 5-10 years,” and 52% “believe that in the future, most advanced degrees will be earned online” (Gallagher, 2018, p.13). Thirty percent of employers use artificial intelligence and analytics to

assess prospective employees, a trend that is expected to increase (Fain, 2018). These trends point to the importance of finding ways to demonstrate skills acquired.

Barriers to Success

Why Students Don't Persist

The enormous effort to understand variation in college student retention and completion rates across institutions has lead to a vast literature, both theoretical and empirical (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 2017). This process-oriented scholarship suggests that academic preparation, social integration, and motivation are key individual attributes for persistence, particularly in the face of organizational (university bureaucracy) and environmental (financial constraints and family obligations) barriers to persistence and completion. Recent work on specific student groups (non-traditional, first-generation, ethnic minorities, etc.) emphasizes campus climate, cultural differences, and power relationships as important social factors shaping student success (Manyanga, Sithole, & Hanson, 2017; Wade, 2019).

From the student perspective, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived value of the curriculum are essential for keeping students motivated to overcome financial barriers and the stress of competing demands from family and work obligations (Tinto, 2016). According to Tinto, universities need to listen to all their students and take seriously their perceptions of their experiences, which differ based on student identities (particularly race, gender, sexual orientation and ability) and the conditions they encounter on campus. This research suggests the ongoing importance of student satisfaction surveys.

Unmet Needs

Ruffalo Noel Levitz, leaders in the student satisfaction survey industry, found in a 2017 comprehensive study of first-year college students that 97 percent of incoming students want to finish college, and yet institutions are still struggling to increase graduation rates (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). The study explored the motivations of first-year college students and the needs they expressed upon entering higher education. The study design measured student motivation and concern as incoming first-year students and then measured them again mid-year, in order to measure unmet needs. About 7 in 10 new students surveyed wanted help becoming socially connected and preparing to be academically successful. Additionally, the study found that financial concerns and erratic study habits are key risks to completion, particularly for first-generation, Hispanic, and African American students. These more vulnerable student groups also report being open to institutional assistance

(e.g., academic support programs and financial guidance). Finally, most students expressed a desire to be engaged with education and career planning in their first year. The biggest gap between what students said they wanted when they arrived on campus and what they received by mid-year was the desire to talk with people about career qualifications and opportunities.

Family Background

Low-income families have historically struggled with collegiate enrollment, persistence, and completion, despite their growing numbers in higher education. Additionally, even for the respectively small percentage of low-income families, when compared to more advantaged populations, the likelihood of degree attainment is low (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Cataldi, Bennet & Chen, 2018; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). However, since 2012, there has been a shift, and low-income students are now enrolling at a higher rate than middle-income students, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). In 2012, low-income students were enrolling at a rate nearly 15% lower than that of middle-income students, but by 2016 low-income student enrollment had overtaken enrollment rates by middle-income students, who remained relatively stagnant. (NCES, 2018a).

Despite this increase in enrollment, and while trends suggest that low-income student enrollment will continue to increase, these students face higher attrition rates than their peers. They commonly struggle with familial and financial obligations when attempting to finish their coursework, often taking lighter course loads than their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). If these hardships weren't enough already, students as a whole face a question of overall college preparation. National assessments, collected through the NCES, have shown either stagnation or decline in areas of reading, mathematics and science for 12th grade students (NCES, 2018b). The question still remains however: If more low-income students are making the journey into higher education, why are they not persisting or completing degrees? Colleges and universities have long studied the science of retention, analyzing trends in an effort to predict the likelihood that students will persist to completion. Researchers have investigated factors that shed light on retention challenges and successes, from best curricular programs (Adelman, 2006), to the impact of socioeconomic and first-generation status (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lohman & Jarvis, 2000; Vuong et al., 2010), to ethnic achievement gaps (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Students have many different forces that assist in creating who they will become; efforts to support self-efficacy may be able to curb some of the effects of adversity. Self-efficacy represents an individual's belief that they can succeed in a task at-hand (Bandura & Estes, 1977). It is no surprise that students with high self-efficacy can persist in challenging tasks, and see them to completion, whereas those with low

self-efficacy can find themselves easily discouraged (Chemers et al. 2001; Vuong et al., 2010). While universities may offer an array of student support services, this does not mean a struggling student will opt to partake in asking for help. When students feel a connection to a university, they are more likely to persist, and these connections can help provide motivation to connect with others, and in turn help more students. When a sense of belonging is weak for a student, they are more likely to become withdrawn, both in and out of the classroom, which undermines student performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007). The postsecondary education landscape has long been riddled with challenges that both students and campus professionals must face, and ultimately work through together. Students can often face and be forced to overcome risk factors throughout their journey of personal and academic discovery.

Cost and Financial Literacy

The financial needs for students have shown to be a constant concern for students, with the cost for 4-year public institutions climbing higher every year, while financial aid distributions cover about one-third to one-half of the cost of tuition for low- and middle-income families (NCES, 2018c). Another barrier that exists for students is basic financial literacy and understanding how to approach college costs. Nationally only 61% of students completed a FAFSA, or Federal Application for Student Aid each year. The National Center for Education Statistics recently completed a study of students who were in ninth grade during the 2009-10 academic year and then went on to complete a college degree. Of the students surveyed by NCES, 24% did not complete their FAFSA, thus eliminating key sources of federal and state grants, subsidized loans, unsubsidized loans, and work study.

Part of the problem that exists for students trying to navigate financing higher education is “the vast majority of the general public does not know what opportunities for aid exist, how to access the various programs, and what one can expect to receive” (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). Results from a study published in the *Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning* suggested that: “(a) students relied heavily on advice from parents, guidance counselors, and friends; (b) attending college was not possible without student loans; and (c) students knew very little about the loans they would be responsible for repaying. (Johnson et al. 2016). Respondents indicated that they did not know of alternatives to the federal loans they were offered and believed that debt was the only option for financing college.

EverFi, an education technology company, completed a survey of more than 100,000 incoming college students and found that most students lacked the ability to answer basic financial literacy questions. Their survey also showed that “most students (60 percent) said they expected to take out loans for college” but a mere 15 percent “felt they had the education, information, and/or support to be able to pay off those debts” (Zapp, n.d.).

Advising

In higher education, it is understood that advising practices have a definitive impact on the student experience and retention. Many advisors serve in a capacity to not only guide a student through curriculum, but also as a key influencer to a student's sense of belonging at a given campus. With the recent trend toward retention- or completion-based funding models for institutions of higher education, the impact of front-line advisors has become increasingly evident. Unfortunately, some college campuses fall short of utilizing the full potential of advisors. Universities often struggle to provide the level of individual support students need to succeed, and so share the responsibility with multiple professionals (Education Advisory Board, 2014). In their 2014 report, however, the Education Advisory Board (EAB) noted that when responsibility of student success is shared throughout the campus, there remains little-to-no accountability of practice. On the other hand, when this responsibility falls to one administrator, it becomes a nearly impossible task. While advisors may be the best-positioned professionals to be at the forefront of student success, they often are not in a position to influence departmental or institutional practices and procedures.

Minority Student Retention

Institutions that have a low percentage of students of color can feel less welcoming to those who might otherwise persist, and a lack of diversity in faculty and staff can also create an environment where students have trouble feeling that their concerns are understood (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). The nationwide college graduation rate for Black students actually stands at an appallingly low rate of 42 percent. This figure is 20 percentage points below the rate for white students. In addition, Black women outpace Black men in college completion. (Here is good news, 2008). The percentage of Black graduates at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is significantly higher. McClain and Perry (2017) identify 5 factors that affect Black student retention and graduation rates: institutional and regional historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, compositional diversity, psychological climate, behavioral climate, and structural diversity. In particular, campus responses to diversity or lack thereof can significantly affect an institution's ability to retain minority students (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014). A climate that enables cultural segregation, the persistence of stereotypes, and microaggressions can lead to poor retention of minority students (Jones, Castellano, & Cole, 2002; Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

Belonging

Strayhorn (2018) argues that a sense of belonging is critical for success in college, both in terms of retention, and also in terms of supporting students' aspirations and achievement. Strayhorn defines belonging as students' perceived connection to the campus community, a feeling of mattering, of being respected, accepted and valued by faculty, staff and peers (p.4). He explains that belonging differs based on students' identities, including differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, and that it varies based on the conditions that students encounter on campus and across time. Strayhorn recommends "legislating belonging" and provides a range of ideas for policies that can increase the sense of belonging. Among his suggestions are "food policies that promote equitable access to fresh foods and produce," "campus conduct policies that reduce bias, prohibit discrimination, and reduce social isolation, especially among ethnic minorities, LGBTQ, undocumented, and immigrants," "funding policies that ensure equitable distribution of resources to all student groups, regardless of popularity or power," "HR policies for staff evaluation that acknowledge and reward time/energy devoted to helping students, connecting with families, or going 'beyond the call of duty,'" and "tenure and promotion policies that encourage intrusive advising, faculty mentoring, and time-intensive work with students" (p. 165).

Challenges to Retention and Completion at SOU

Cost and Financial Literacy

In Oregon, nearly every year since the 2005-2006 academic year has shown an increase in the cost of attendance. Data from the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) shows this growth to be slow and steady, but it fails to convey the cost of room, board, and additional costs. From 2008 to 2018, SOU's resident tuition and fees have grown from $5,718 to $9,654, and non-resident fees have grown from $17,685 to $25,584 (SOU Office of Institutional Research, 2018). Over the same period, room and board costs have grown from $8,418 to $13,230. The average estimated family contribution (EFC) for a first-time, full-time student is $15,603, which means that the average SOU student does not qualify for a Pell Grant or related need-based financial assistance. The maximum amount of subsidized and unsubsidized loans from the federal government amounts to $5,500 in the first year, leaving a formidable financial hurdle for students. Programs like the Oregon Office of Student Access and Completion (OSAC), the Southern Online Scholarship Application (SOSA), Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE), and assistance from offices like the SOU Foundation help to reduce the cost for qualifying students, but the gap still remains.

Housing

Since the Spring 2014, University Housing at Southern Oregon University has been conducting exit surveys of the students who are moving out of the residence halls, to gather a better understanding of why students are leaving SOU. Over time, the data has shown that students who are transferring from SOU to another institutions report that they are looking for a school that might be in a larger city, are struggling with the rising costs of tuition, and/or are seeking programs tailored to their career goals. For students choosing to leave SOU more generally, surveys have revealed that students are leaving due to personal or family issues, the overall cost of SOU, a personal experience that was not favorable for them, or lack of preparation for the rigors of college academics.

As we are seeing with national trends, tuition and housing costs continue to rise, and with state funding for higher education not keeping pace with inflation, the financial burden shifts more onto the backs of the students every year. While our tuition rate is competitive with other Oregon public universities, our cost of room and board is higher than other schools (College Tuition Compare, 2019). Over the years we have seen an increase of students who are not prepared for the financial, emotional, and rigorous academic challenges that happen during what for many is their first time away from home. In order for students to be able to continue at an institution, they need to find new support systems and navigate the new challenges they face.

Diversity and Inclusion

In 2018, 40.1% of SOU students identified as non-white, up from only 16.4% in 1998 (SOU Institutional Research, 2019). During this time, the proportion of Hispanic students increased from 3.4% to 12.1%, multiracial students from 4.2% to 9.6%, and Blacks students from 0.9% to 2.6%. The proportion of American Indian/Alaskan Native stayed about the same 1.4% to 1.3%, and the proportion of Asian students declined, from 3.7% to 2.0%. In 2018, SOU had only three faculty who identified as Black, two who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, and only 12.5% of all faculty and staff identify as a part of a racial or ethnic minority group (SOU Fact Book, 2018). SOU's student body is increasingly diverse, and the pace of change is accelerating. A faculty and staff that don't reflect that growing diversity will feel less welcoming to students of color (Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

Sexual Assault and Retention

Angela Fleischer, MSW, LCSW, and Director of Equity Grievance in SOU's Office of Student Support and Intervention, notes that sexual assault is a retention issue, as SOU frequently fails to retain students involved in sexual assault complaints, including both students on the complainant side and the responding side. In the first 78 days of 2019, SOU's Office of Student Support and Intervention received 50 reports of sexual assault. Greater prevention and support efforts, including dedicated FTE, would reduce sexual assault on campus and also contribute to improved retention (Angela Fleischer, personal communication, March 19, 2019).

Insights from Adult Learners

According to EAB (Understanding the Shifting Adult Learner Mindset, 2019,p.18) the primary reason adult students did not pursue more education was 39.6% cost of attending, 23.1% current family responsibilities, 21.6% professional/work related commitments, 5.2% required prerequisites, 1.5% past academic performance, and 9% other. This coincides with anecdotal information from students in SOU's Innovation and Leadership program. Adult students currently in the program stopped out of college years ago mainly due to job or family obligations. An EAB study found that students who attend college part time but do not enroll in summer courses have a greater chance of not returning in the fall (Education Advisory Board, 2019b). Understanding what influences students decisions to stop out can guide SOU in designing support systems and policies to encourage persistence.

Insights from University Seminar and the Bridge Program

SOU does not systematically complete exit interviews with students leaving the university. However, there is substantial anecdotal evidence about factors that influence retention; most notably, USem and Bridge instructors track factors that influence students' decisions to exit SOU each quarter. The most frequently reported factors that influence first-year retention include: college affordability; housing costs; financial aid challenges; mental health issues; sense of belonging; academic issues related to major; lack of academic rigor; academic challenge; family crisis; sports opportunities elsewhere; and challenges related to employment.

Insights from Interviews with Students Who Have Left SOU

Dr. Eva Skuratowicz conducted interviews in 2016 with a sample of 15 SOU students who had left the university before graduation. The former students were asked a series of questions, including why they left SOU and their current educational or occupational status. Of particular interest is that four of the fifteen former students left SOU to enroll in for-profit or community college healthcare training programs.

Four other interviewees shared a number of reasons why they left but financial problems were a significant factor; two of those people have continued their education. Three students left because they were not able to figure out what they were working towards while enrolled at SOU. As one put it, “I didn’t know what I wanted and I didn’t want to go into debt not knowing what I was going into debt for.” Two of those former students are working full-time and one is traveling. The reasons for the remaining four former students varied from illness to being homesick to wanting to open a small business.

Current Retention Practices at SOU

Cost and Financial Literacy

Understanding current trends in the cost of higher education and the deficits in financial literacy in college students, SOU has multiple departments working together to help the student experience be supported from the time they accept to the time they graduate. Financial Aid has been attending Admissions events for several years, and starting in Spring 2019 will also include University Housing when they meet with potential students to discuss the financing of higher education, the ability to find safe and affordable housing, and how to navigate the next steps to become a student at Southern Oregon University. Starting in Summer 2018, University Housing, Financial Aid, and the Enrollment Service Center, created a satellite office during all of the Raider Registrations as well, giving students, families, and supporters a one-stop shop for all of their billing, financial aid, and housing needs. This proved to be helpful as all three of these offices were dedicated in supporting each other and the students they were serving. Students did not feel that they were being sent somewhere else on campus to try and find the office or person to answer their question; they were given an advocate who could help navigate the institutional system. These departments will continue to keep this for the future Raider Registrations. Financial Aid has also been hosting "5-Minute FAFSA Wellness Checks", and going to different parts of campus to be where the students are to answer any questions about the students’ current and next academic year's FAFSA. While students are still getting used to this outreach, we have begun to see the advantages to being in the spaces where students are, so that they engage with the services that will help them be successful students.

SOU’s Predictive Analytics

SOU’s Office of Institutional Research tested and found 30 variables that are correlated with retention; analyzing student performance in the first year of college,

these 30 variable can indicate relative rates of retention on a 1-10 scale. Student Support Coordinators have received data on their advisees, and beginning in Spring 2019, USem advisors will also receive that data. The data can be used to understand which students may require greater intervention, such as enhanced advising. The factors relate to academic achievement (e.g., GPA, SAT/ACT scores, Honors); financial well-being (e.g., FAFSA filed, EFC, Unmet financial need, PELL award, scholarship awards, balances, tuition rates); college readiness (e.g., major declared, math remediation, foreign language deficiency, transfer hours, Advanced Southern Credit hours, Fall term credits); belonging (e.g., sports, residence halls, campus employment); and, identity (students of color, veterans, first gen, rural high schools).

Advising

The newly adopted Student Success Coordinator model allows SOU to address some of the best practices encouraged by EAB and noted in the literature. Combined with the predictive analytics model produced by the SOU Office of Institutional Research, advisors can assist in reaching out to students who are facing academic challenges. Additionally, the shift to utilizing course maps, or degree planners, will assist in steering student-advisor conversations to focus on a student's qualitative experience. By allowing discussions around challenging topics such as curricular exploration, career guidance, financial concerns, or other personal matters which may be hindering a student, advisors are in a position to move the needle on student retention. EAB also suggests that SOU should carefully consider how advising is structured, in terms of personnel. Students often have multiple advisors, over their time at SOU, which leads to a higher likelihood of conflicting information, lack of rapport, and a difficulty for students to easily navigate advising and exploration on campus. Additionally, the importance of advising documentation should be pressed, with the expectation that faculty or other academic support services will have to maintain clear notes of previous meetings as to not have the student "start-over" during any given meeting. Lastly, to best hone the knowledge needed by a division advisor, a keen understanding of major migration should be developed (EAB, 2014).

Minority Student Retention

A March 2019 SOU Retention Summit included a table focused on strategies to support retention of ethnic minorities at SOU. The table identified factors that contribute to poor retention, strategies that are effective, and strategies that SOU should consider adopting. Among the factors contributing to poor retention of ethnic minorities at SOU is curriculum, instruction, and assessment that is not culturally responsive; under-representation of ethnic minorities among students, staff, and

faculty at SOU and in the Ashland community; and, experiences of microaggressions and overt racism on-campus and in the community. Among the current SOU strategies that are seen to be effective at recruiting, supporting, and retaining ethnic minority students include: SOU's Pre-College Youth Programs (including Cesar Chavez, Academia Latina, Pirates to Raiders, Latino Family Day, and Konaway Nika Tillcum residential camp), the recent Black Youth Leadership Summit, the SOU Bridge Program, Success at Southern and TRiO, and efforts by resource centers, including the Native American Students' Resource Center and the Multicultural Students Resource Center, SOU Athletics, and credit for prior learning for bilingual students.

SOU Bridge Program and Retention

Southern Oregon University's Bridge Program is a first-year experience that helps promising students transition to college successfully by supporting their social, emotional, and academic strengths through Bridge Seminar classes, peer-to-peer mentoring, study groups, and social, cultural, and civic engagement activities. The program's key learning outcomes relate to academic success, a sense of belonging, leadership skills, cultural competency, and civic engagement. The program is available to Oregon high school graduates and recruitment focuses on students who bring equity strengths to campus, including low-income, first-generation, and historically underrepresented students. The program also recognizes the contributions of students who have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, including students who identify as Dreamers, LGBTQIA, former foster care youth, homeless youth, refugees, neurodivergent, and others.

Case Study: Retaining a Bridge Student

There are typically multiple factors that influence a student's decision to leave SOU. For example, a Bridge student, "Felicity," decided that she would leave SOU after the Winter 2019 Term. When her Bridge team checked in with her to find out why she was planning to leave the university, she shared these motives: "My mom is pregnant, and I want to be home to help her when she delivers. Also, I can transfer to my local community college and live at home, which will be cheaper, and I'll be less of a burden on my family" These factors influenced her plan to exit, but upon digging deeper, the Bridge Team learned more. Felicity is a first-generation college student, from a low-income, immigrant family; her father passed away when she was a toddler, and her mother completed only 3rd grade. Felicity is a 3.4 GPA pre-Nursing student, but was concerned by rumors that the OHSU Nursing Program is highly-competitive, but also that it may not accept students from her ethnic group. Emails to the program weren't returned, and she felt that signaled that she wouldn't be accepted, which stressed her. Additionally, she needed a job to support her college

expenses, but she'd never had any formal employment before; though she distributed her resume to employers around the Rogue Valley, she received no interviews. And, finally, she did not have any healthcare but has an emerging healthcare need.

The Bridge team was able to connect Felicity with the campus representative to the OHSU Nursing Program, Javier de la Mora; this meeting dramatically increased Felicity's confidence that she can has a chance to earn admission to the program; this also deepened her sense of belonging at SOU. The Bridge team was also able to help Felicity to find a job; she was interested in working at the Student Recreation Center, and Felicity's Bridge team worked with Melissa Bates, Assistant Director of Campus Recreation Operations and Fitness, to create a Bridge Job for Melissa. Working at the Student Recreation Center, Felicity will earn enough to cover her existing need gap for her spring term. Also, when Felicity went home over spring break, she learned that her family supports her decision to return to SOU; she has several younger siblings who are excited to have a big sister who is the first in the family to attend college; Felicity is proud to be a role model for them. At home, she also renewed her healthcare coverage, through OHP, so she will be able to gain access to healthcare in the Ashland area.

It was possible to support Felicity in continuing at SOU because the Bridge Program provides "enhanced advising," wrap-around advising and support services. Not all students at SOU require enhanced advising, but for at-risk students, these services can contribute significantly to retention and success. University Seminar instructors provide similar "enhanced advising," sometimes called "intrusive advising." Additionally, the frequent contact between Bridge instructors and USem instructors means that students see their advisors at least four hours a week in class, increasing opportunities for intervention.

Lessons From Other Institutions

What can we learn from other colleges and universities that are improving their ability to retain and graduate students, particularly vulnerable populations?

Connecting Students to the University

Learning seminars targeted to particular student groups is one method to connect learners to the university and increase retention. *High Impact Practices for Student Success* (Inside Higher Ed, 2018) features two colleges that have addressed the needs of specific student populations with practices that create community through learning seminars and mentor relationships. Bunker Hill Community College embraced its part-time students and built community specifically for them, rather

than encouraging them to convert to full-time (Smith, 2018). The college has been able to increase retention of part-time students by offering them their own learning community seminars, which are designed to be rigorous, relevant to their lives, and tied to student supports. Additional targeted services include student mentors and success coaches who assist with issues that arise outside the classroom. St. Lawrence University has tackled the sophomore slump, in which students face questions about "their place and purpose on campus and beyond," by providing seminars that include experiential, contemporary, and community-based learning (Barber & Thacker, 2018, p. 28). The seminars also feature advice on majors, internships and research. Mentoring is also a significant component, as faculty interaction with students includes group meals and field trips. This shift has led to the increased retention of sophomores, but equally important has been the creation of engaged juniors and seniors.

A recent alignment of two and four-year colleges in Houston, Texas, worked to extend students' connections beyond their own school and embed their academic trajectory within the region (Smith, 2018b). This model, HoustonGPS, may hold promise for SOU and the southern Oregon consortium. Four Houston colleges are creating guided pathways across colleges and sectors to put the interests of students ahead of the interests of institutions so that students can graduate earlier and are supported if they transfer. Class sequencing for majors are aligned across institutions and math requirements are reformed to align with career requirements. Participating colleges use technology in a number of different ways to facilitate student success: to create degree maps for students; as an early warning system that predicts risk of failing; and as a way for students to connect with advisors.

Adult Learners

The organization Graduate! Network connects colleges with community groups to make it easier for adults to return to college (Blumenstyk, 2018). There are also other organizations that help with the needs of adult students attending college. For example, some institutions have stackable credentials to help get adults started in college to move onto completing their degree. Institutions need to cater to adult students and understand their needs as they are different than the traditional student. Some states have tried to establish policies for debt forgiveness or using current financial aid to pay back old debt to remove any holds on their accounts that may prevent them from attending school. Other needs particular to adult students include child care and different types of support to attend school. For example, adult learners often need flexible options to take classes and access college resources. This type of flexible access would include hours beyond 9 to 5.

Alternative credentials

Fong, Janzow, and Peck (2016) from Pearson and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) conducted research on alternative credentials, looking at trends for the future towards micro credentials and badges among other types of credentials demonstrating competencies. The authors note that alternative credentials could decrease the skills gap and meet the needs of future learners and employers. The State University of New York (SUNY) already has a task force working on micro credentials for students to validate their competency in specific skills. SUNY talks about how micro credentials can be stackable to eventually obtain a degree but splits the work into different parts (State University of New York, n.d.). This could help students persist in college by dividing the college workload into different sections to be completed. This could help achieve a sense of accomplishment along the way to completing a degree.

Case-studies of Institutional Improvement

The Education Advisory Board (EAB) recently published the *Case Study Compendium* (2019), highlighting particularly impactful efforts of 4-year universities to improve students success. EAB is a private firm specializing in higher education analytics and best practices. These examples feature strategies to elevate faculty engagement, transform academic advising, coordinate student interventions, engage students through a mobile app, and leverage data-driven insights (Education Advisory Board, 2019a). The following success stories from small to mid-size public universities feature Navigate technology (a mobile app platform for engaging students based on data analytics) and other EAB strategies. These may be particularly instructive for SOU.

Coordinating Student Interventions

The University of South Alabama had declining retention despite enrollment growth since 2005, and the 6-year graduation rate plateaued at 36%. They used Navigate data to implement programs to help high credit-hours students graduate and high-risk students (low GPAs) get intensive academic counseling. They increased retention by 12% over four years, and graduated 126 more students in 2016 than in 2015 (pp. 8-9). Similarly, SUNY Albany used Navigate to implemented a program to help Pell recipients stay in compliance and a program to contact students not enrolled for the following term and help them solve problems. This was a coordinated effort across areas of the university that re-enrolled students (pp. 10-11).

Transforming Academic Advising

Many schools accomplished significant gains in retention and graduation rates by implementing a targeted advising model – identifying at-risk students and reaching out to them to solve problems before they dropped out. Stony Brook University, for example, segmented second-year students based on risk levels and assigned high-risk students to professional advisors and paired low-risk students with volunteer

mentors. The high-risk students received casework-style interventions. These efforts produced an increase in the percent of sophomores declaring majors by the end of the year and an increased in rising junior retention (pp. 27-28). Middle Tennessee State University overhauled the advising system to a proactive model and attained 8.5% increase in retention and a 4.3% increase in graduation since 2014 (pp.17-18).

Engaging Students through a Mobile App and Leveraging Data

Robert Morris University increased retention by 2% in one year after implementing Navigate. The mobile app helped coordinate every aspect of student life (scheduling, campus locations, office hours, registration, housing, financial aid, etc.) and was used as a conduit for student engagement and feedback (pp.21-22). Georgia State University implemented several data-driven intervention programs including course redesign, supplemental instruction, freshman learning communities, and fee-drop grants. Their efforts increased graduation rates by 3%, with particularly strong gains among African American and Latino/a students (pp. 15-16). Closer in size to SOU, Salsbury University used collected date to develop a hybrid professional-faculty advising model that coordinated academic programs, students affairs, and enrollment management. They targeted programmatic changes to encourage timely degree completion, which resulted in a 2% increase in retention.

Conclusion: Becoming a Student-Ready Campus

According to *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Students Success* (McNair et al., 2016), colleges and universities can and should do more to support students. Instead of complaining that students aren't "college-ready," the authors argue, institutions need to become more "student-ready." According to the authors, "A student-ready college is one that strategically and holistically advances student success, and works tirelessly to educate *all* students for civic and economic participation in a global interconnected society" (p. 5). The cultural change we are experiencing in higher education requires us to reframe the dialogue and ask what we can do to create learning environments that promote inclusion and success. Too often, higher education's policies and practices further stratify and marginalize students.

In this vision, all services and activities in the university are strategically designed to facilitate student progress toward degree completion and post-college success. The authors suggest that becoming student-ready requires everyone in the college ecosystem to take responsibility for student success. Community partnerships are also important to student success because many of the key challenges faced by today's diverse student populations (e.g., unmet financial need, family responsibilities, military status, age, etc.) originate outside the classroom.

Student-ready educators believe in students' talents and cognitive capacities rather than focusing on deficits that students may be perceived to carry. They believe that, "Anyone can learn anything under the right conditions" (p. 148).

Questions for the Future

Strategic Oversight of Student Success: How should we define success at SOU? How can SOU's administration provide more effective strategic oversight to manage student satisfaction and success? How can our culture shift to make student success something that we share as everyone's responsibility, at all levels of staff, faculty, and administration?

Closing the Equity Gap: How do we create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus? How can curriculum be more culturally responsive? How can we increase our recruitment and retention of diverse staff, faculty, and administrators, with particular attention to ethnic and racial diversity? How can we change our campus culture to ensure that first-generation, non-traditional, and students of color feel like they belong at SOU and that they are an essential and valued part of our community? How can we increase financial and social support for these students? How can we increase their academic engagement, opportunities for career exploration, and access to mentoring? How can we shift to become a "student-ready" campus that supports all learners?

Academic Advising and Engagement: How can we better delineate and coordinate academic advising roles and responsibilities to best guide and mentor students as they become more confident, directed, and engaged learners? How can we intervene strategically to ensure that we act on opportunities to retain students at critical moments?

College and Financial Literacy: How can we help students navigate university resources and services with more efficiency and better outcomes? How can we improve students' financial literacy to help students better understand, anticipate, and manage college costs?

Critical Student Support Services: How can we ensure that all students have adequate access to critical support and intervention services on campus? How can we ensure that our programs and facilities adequately support the health and well-being of all SOU students? How can we ensure that students are safe and feel safe on campus?

Career Connections: How can we expand current efforts to engage students to explore career opportunities and plan for the transition from college to career? How can we improve coordination among the work of program faculty, Career Connections, and the Alumni Association? How can we harness the experience and support of alumni in service of current students?

Micro Credentials and Flexible Delivery: How can micro credentials, as a way for students to show proficiency in specific skills while working towards a degree, benefit students? How can increased flexibility of classes, resources, and alternative credentialing support student success in college and career?

Ongoing Data Collection and Analysis: How can we utilize new tools, like the Navigate App, exit interviews with students who leave early, and systematic tracking of university alumni, to improve outcomes? How can surveys aid in monitoring our progress on student satisfaction and success? How can our data collection and analysis contribute to improved student success?

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