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Student Affairs, Persistence, and the Growing Need for Inquiry

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Abstract

Evidence for how Student Affairs contributes to efforts to increased college persistence and degree attainment is abundant and compelling. Still, Student Affairs is not often central in discussions about how to move the persistence dial forward. It is critical for student affairs professionals to engage in inquiry, not only to equitably improve service to students but also to better communicate the impact of the work. This paper provides an overview of the Student Affairs impacts on college student persistence through engagement in high-impact and evidenced practices, calling for increased engagement in inquiry in the interest of better situating higher education to meet student needs.

Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) book *How College Affects Students (Vol. 2)* cites many ways that college broadly affects students. When examining the Student Affairs-related work accounted for in this collection of research, one can see that co-curricular activities foster development of many important and desirable outcomes - career maturity, academic success, persistence and degree attainment, principled moral reasoning, openness to diversity, well-being, psychosocial change, cognitive skill development and intellectual growth. Student Affairs contributes to development in these areas through rich engagement opportunities, several of which align with what have been identified as high-impact practices by the American Association for Colleges and Universities (AAC&U; Kuh, 2008).

While the impact of Student Affairs work is broad, this paper focuses on examining and communicating Student Affairs contributions to student persistence and degree attainment, doing so in ways that recognize and address inequities in the ways that students from historically underserved backgrounds experience institutions. The important role that inquiry plays in understanding the ways that Student Affairs contributes to student persistence is described, followed by a summary of the key areas that Student Affairs contributes to persistence and degree attainment. Throughout this summary, evidenced high-impact practices are highlighted. This is done in an effort to highlight the areas of Student Affairs where inquiry can be focused to ensure that high-impact practices are implemented effectively at the local level and to demonstrate some of the areas in which students experience high-impact practices through engagement with Student Affairs activities, programs, and services.

Persistence and Degree Attainment

Persistence is a prevalent topic in higher education, but what does it mean to persist? The first definition in Merriam Webster dictionary for "persist" is "to continue to do something or to try to do something even though it is difficult or other people want you to stop." Thinking of persistence in this way illuminates what a struggle it can be to persist and what a learning process persistence is in itself. These are struggles that students face daily. Historically, certain groups of people were not offered pathways to education;

the impact of that history is felt today in systemic and nuanced ways, which can make persistence and degree attainment even more difficult for historically underserved groups. Some of these struggles are outlined throughout this paper. Success may not always look like having a degree in-hand, still it is incumbent upon institutions to create environments in which all students can thrive so that if they do not leave the university with a degree, it is because of their own decision or circumstances, not a result of something that could have been influenced by the institution. It is the institution's responsibility to help students authentically navigate towards their destination by providing tools for them to do so, and there are many ways that Student Affairs supports this responsibility.

The most broadly influential ways in which Student Affairs contributes to student persistence are through promoting opportunities for peer interaction and through career and professional development. The sampling of research that follows is not intended to be comprehensive, but serves as a brief overview of the various ways that Student Affairs impacts student persistence towards degree attainment. The areas that are situated especially well in terms of their ability to make meaningful and unique contributions to institutional and national conversations about student persistence are briefly described. Examining where and how Student Affairs creates impact can ignite ideas for how to infuse high-impact practices throughout the practice. While much can be learned from research on what has worked at other institutions with regard to the ways that Student Affairs makes a difference in student persistence and degree attainment, it is more critical than ever to engage in inquiry at the local level to understand the impact of the specific approaches taken at institutions.

The Role of Inquiry

There is not a clear formula or process for creating student success. Student Affairs professionals must try evidenced or innovative practices and come full circle by determining if the approach was effective for the specific population for whom it was rolled out by engaging in inquiry. Inquiry serves as a tool for engaging curiosities about the work of Student Affairs and helps

to uncover the best ways to serve diverse student populations. Much of Student Affairs inquiry efforts have focused on measuring learning outcomes. Measurement of learning is important but should not be where the pursuit of inquiry ends. Making efforts to roll evidence of student learning up in a way that practitioners can communicate their contributions to broader university goals is critical to sustaining and improving this work. What students are learning is inarguably important to understand and monitor; though, it does not articulate the ways in which Student Affairs work positively influences student persistence and degree attainment. While college is about far more than having a degree in-hand, having a degree in-hand and persistence towards that degree are some of the most closely monitored metrics for colleges and universities – both internally and externally. When considering this in combination with the realities of shrinking budgets and increased pressure for administration to make difficult decisions about resource allocation, it is increasingly important for Student Affairs professionals to demonstrate their contributions to persistence towards degree attainment.

Vincent Tinto's 1998 call to action for moving the persistence dial rings true today:

As we study practice, our learning will be immeasurably enriched... Our research on persistence must enable us not only to document the impact of practice on student behavior, but also to understand how and why that impact arises... it is that understanding that best serves our interest as researchers and theorists. (p. 176)

To add to Tinto's assertion, understanding the practice also serves the interest of practitioners who are committed to student success. Even practices that are considered to be high-impact must be closely monitored to ensure that they are producing desirable outcomes, as they are only high-impact if they are implemented effectively and brought to scale so that the opportunity to engage in multiple high-impact practices is accessible to all students (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Kuh & O'Donnel, 2013). This is not only in the interest of providing the best service for students, but also to strengthen the ability to use evidence to communicate the profound contributions that Student Affairs has on both student persistence towards degree attainment and student learning through leveraging and contributing to the pool of evidence, both

locally and within the field.

As institutions reconsider the ways in which students are served, Student Affairs practitioners need to be a part of these critical conversations, situating themselves as key contributors to student success and opening opportunities to serve more students. Through inquiry, Student Affairs professionals can co-envision a college experience that creates more of an impact and encompasses what students learn both inside and outside the classroom. Pursuing inquiry takes a significant amount of time. Therefore, it is important for leaders at all levels of the organization to recognize and address the reality that their employees will need to make time for this practice in order to have a sustainable organization. By demonstrating major contributions to student development, perhaps the focus of what it means to attain a college degree could be re-focused, making the leap from being *extra-curricular* to being a true co-curricular experience.

Overview of Student Affairs Impact

Astin's 1984 theory of student involvement posits that the time and effort that a student devotes to activities which support their educational goals impacts their likelihood of achieving goals and therefore persisting. This assertion is further supported by the conclusions that Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) put forth in *How College Affects Students* as well as those presented in Kuh's 2009 paper "What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know about Student Engagement." Dating back to Tinto's 1975 model for social and academic integration, social integration has long been recognized as a factor that positively contributes to student persistence as well, by way of cultivating meaningful commitments to the institution. Given these assertions, it is important to carefully craft environments in which students have opportunities for meaningful involvement and social integration.

Environments that are created for students can significantly impact whether or not they remain at the institution (Astin, 1984; Osterman, 2000). One of the broadest ways that Student Affairs programming and services positively impact persistence and degree completion is through creating opportunities for students to interact with peers. Students who feel accepted, have

satisfaction with their social lives, and experience social integration are more likely to persist towards their degree (Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Flynn, 2014; Hu, 2011; Beil & Shope, 1990).

While developing close personal relationships with peers has positive effects for students across gender (Nora, et al., 1996), racial and ethnic backgrounds, some findings and recommendations suggest that engagement in educationally purposeful activities can have an even stronger impact on persistence for students who have been traditionally underserved in institutions of higher education (Harper, 2012; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Kuh, 2008). Further, outside the classroom interactions with peers and faculty and mentoring relationships positively influence persistence; this has been especially influential for female-identifying students early in their college experience (Nora, et al., 1996). An important role that Student Affairs professionals play in their interactions with students is helping them identify where their passions and interests lie and connecting them with opportunities to get involved in educationally purposeful activities that resonate with them.

When considering the ways in which Student Affairs influences persistence and degree attainment, it is crucial to examine the ways in which this work differentially impacts various populations. Whether driven by a moral obligation or by the national (Cahalan & Perna, 2015) and local calls to not only raise but to equalize retention, Student Affairs professionals are challenged to consider who is *not* being retained and why. As those in the field learn why certain student populations are not retained, it is critical to make sincere efforts to better serve those specific populations by providing them with opportunities to engage in activities that will propel them forward. For example, knowing that familial obligations often hinder student success for racial minority, female, and transfer students (Astin, 1975; Marling, 2013; Nora, [et.al.](#), 1996), how can institutions provide support for those responsible for child and/or elder care? Additionally, how can the hours of operation at institutions be reconsidered to accommodate different schedules? Inquiry can help to set both students and institutions up for success as it helps

professionals discover how to best meet student needs. The only way institutions will succeed is if students succeed, so it is essential to learn from them and adjust. In the following sections, specific approaches to creating opportunities for social and academic integration that have been found to positively influence persistence and degree attainment are described.

First-year experiences

Student experiences during their first year of college strongly influence whether or not they will remain enrolled at that institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); perhaps even more influential than one's pre-college background characteristics, aspirations and aptitudes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). First-year seminars and experiences are one of the high-impact practices identified by AAC&U (Kuh, 2008) and are thought to be influential because they make students feel supported, increasing their sense of community and institutional commitment (Berger & Milem, 1999; Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Specifically, early engagement is considered a critical aspect of first-year engagement. One study reported that the level of involvement within the first six to seven weeks had a significant impact on whether or not students remained enrolled at the institution (Milem & Berger, 1997). While the types of first-year opportunities differ by institution, the most cited approaches described center around orientation experiences and first-year courses or seminars.

Evidence suggests that attending orientation prior to the beginning of one's first year in college has a positive impact on first to second year retention (Beil & Shope, 1990). Some students benefit from a different, more focused approach to orientation in addition to the large-scale student orientation. Specifically, bridge programs that take place during the summer prior to the first year in school which are structured to help students navigate their transition into college have been recommended as a practice that promotes equitable student success (Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Harper, 2012). A prominent example of this type of program is the Federal TRiO Program's Student Support Services. 2013-14 data shows an average year-to-year persistence rate of 87.9% for program participants across the 1,029 participating institutions

(U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Even more compelling, 31.4% (or, 323 institutions) of the participating institutions reported a 100% year-to-year persistence rate for program participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Evidence has suggested that students who participate in first-year courses and seminars have higher rates of enrolling in a second year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additional others have found that participants in such courses show improvements in academic performance, as well as retention (Boudreau & Kromrey, 1994; Glass & Garrett, 1995). Course design matters though. Jamelske (2009) found that first-year courses and seminars that were taught by faculty who follow the goals established for such courses (e.g. strengthening connection to the institution, inspiring curiosity, enhancing academic skills, making connections with peers or others in the institution) were shown to have a significant impact on retention, while those courses that did not follow the goals that had been established for first-year courses were not found to have an impact on retention.

Practical steps can be taken to increase the positive impacts that first-year seminars can have on first to second year retention. First, first-year courses should focus on fostering attachment to the institution in addition to helping students adjust socially and academically. Given that, Permzadian & Crede (2015) recommend considering an extended orientation-style seminar rather than an academic-focused or hybrid seminar. Secondly, it is suggested that faculty and professional staff taught first-year courses are more effective than courses taught by students (Permzadian & Crede, 2015). Instructors should follow specific goals for first-year courses and seminars in order to improve the impact on retention and GPA. Acknowledging the importance of following specific goals, institutions need to provide the necessary training to prepare them and allow for enough time in class to have an impact on students (Jamelske, 2009). Further, Jamelske (2009) recommends rewarding instructors who perform at a high level in order to encourage quality instruction in first-year courses. A third recommendation offered by Permzadian & Crede (2015) is that first-year courses be offered to all students, not just students who are considered to be academically underprepared. Finally, Permzadian & Crede (2015) recommend that first-year courses

function better as a stand-alone course rather than as part of a learning community. However, Jamelske (2009) suggests exploring how folding first-year courses into the *living and learning* community experience might enhance student retention. The above evidence is especially helpful when considering students who are attending college for the first time. Though, the growing population of transfer students require different approaches for promoting student success.

According to a 2015 report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015), over one-third (37.2%) of students in the fall 2008 cohort transferred institutions at least once, with 45% of those who transferred doing so more than once. An examination of data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggests that transfer students do not generally engage in as many educationally purposeful activities as their non-transfer peers (Kuh, 2003). This is likely due to various characteristics of this student population including possible differences in age, familial obligations, and commuting to campus. Orientations for transfer populations and transfer success courses can help these students learn how to navigate their new educational institution by sharing tips for success and learning how to become involved on campus (Marling, 2013). Likewise, targeted approaches to orientation and first-year seminars may also be beneficial to academically underprepared students.

Students who arrive at college academically underprepared tend to be less likely to think that they need additional assistance such as tutoring and would benefit from early encouragement to become experts in their field in the interest of preparing for their future careers (Melzer & Grant, 2016). Melzer & Grant (2016) also found that these students are less likely to believe that they can be successful in college. These findings suggest the need for additional support systems with special attention to building self-efficacy in underprepared students and more emphasis placed on career development.

Involvement with student organizations

Involvement in student organizations introduces many

opportunities that positively influence student persistence through interaction with peers. Specifically, early peer involvement strengthens perceptions of institutional and social support, whereas those who are not involved early in their college experience are less likely to perceive their peers as supportive (Berger & Milem, 1999). For example, students involved with student government show greater than average satisfaction with their friendships with peers (Astin, 1997). Students who feel accepted exhibit stronger commitment to their educational pursuits (Osterman, 2000), suggesting that even activities that are not deliberately structured as educationally purposeful have positive effects on student success. With the impact being so strong, institutions should make strong efforts to encourage students to become involved in student organizations (Nora, et al., 1996). Targeted efforts towards transfer student populations should be prioritized, as they tend to have lower levels of engagement (Marling, 2013).

Membership in a fraternity or sorority is one type of involvement that has been broadly examined and has been cited as a factor that positively contributes to college persistence (Astin, 1975; Beil & Shope, 1990; Nelson, Halperin, Wasserman, Smith, & Graham, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, some studies have identified that one's first year of being involved with a fraternity or sorority may be associated with negative impacts on academic performance (DeBard, Lake, & Binder, 2006; Hayek, Carini, O'Day, & Kuh, 2002; Nelson, et al., 2006). Given that both positive and less-desirable outcomes have been associated with fraternity and sorority membership, it is critical to explore what it is about fraternity and sorority membership that promotes positive outcomes (such as social integration and developing a connection to the institution) and how the less-desirable outcomes can be addressed. One article offered several recommendations for enhancing the positive aspects of fraternity and sorority membership based on results from their inquiry, such as: enforcing more rigid GPA requirements for new members, extended orientations for those interested in Greek-letter organizations, policy development, and behavioral incentives (DeBard, et al., 2006). Further engaging in this type of inquiry will help university professionals work with fraternity and sorority

leaders to proactively curb less desirable behaviors while maximizing positive outcomes that are associated with membership.

Service learning

Service and community-based learning are recommended as a high-impact practices by AAC&U (Kuh, 2008), as they give students opportunities to apply what they learn in real-world scenarios, cultivating civic responsibility (Zlotkowski, 2002). Evidence suggests that service learning opportunities can be influential in supporting student persistence as well (Astin & Sax, 1998; Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010; Gallini & Moely, 2003). According to Yeh (2010), service learning can be especially influential when it comes to retaining first generation college students.

Recreational facilities and intramurals

Campus recreational facilities have become more than a facility for current students, also serving as a recruitment tool for potential future students (Bryant, Banta, & Bradley, 1995). In addition to being a space that can help recruit students to a campus, student involvement in recreational facilities promotes persistence by increasing interaction with other students, enhancing their sense of community and social integration (Belch, Gebel, & Maas, 2001; Hall, 2006; Huesman, Brown, Lee, Kellogg, & Radcliffe, 2009; Miller, 2011). Both self-report and outcomes-oriented evidence suggest that involvement with a recreational facility plays a role in enhancing student retention and persistence (Belch, et al., 2001; Danbert, Pivarnik, McNeil, & Washington, 2014; Hall, 2006; Huesman, et al., 2009; Lindsey & Sessoms, 2006; McElveen & Rossow, 2014; Miller, 2011). Some of these studies also found evidence that participation in recreational facilities had a positive effect on GPA (Belch, et al., 2001; Danbert, et al., 2014).

Living on-campus

Living in a residence hall is an important time for adjusting to college life (for first-year students) and meeting new people, a conducive environment for fostering social integration. Due to the rich opportunities for engagement with peers, living

on-campus is considered to be a strong factor influencing student retention and persistence (Astin, 1975; Astin, 1977; Jamelske, 2009; Longerbeam, 2010; Thompson, 1993). Living on campus can be especially beneficial for first-generation college students, as they are less likely to engage in meaningful outside the classroom activities when they do not live on campus (Pike & Kuh, 2005). In instances where this is not feasible (for example, students with families) other innovative approaches should be employed in order to promote involvement on campus (Pike & Kuh, 2005). On-campus residents are more likely to be involved in outside the classroom activities than commuter students, and have expressed higher satisfaction with their college experiences (Astin, 1977). Schudde's 2011 logistic regression found a positive correlative effect of 3.3 percentage-points in students' probability of returning for a second year of college for those who lived on-campus during their first year in college.

To further encourage social integration, Braxton & McClendon (2001) recommend intentional housing assignments that encourage the development of a sense of community among residents. Aitken (1982) found a significant relationship between a student's degree of satisfaction with their residence hall experience and their decision of whether or not to return to the institution for a second year. According to this study, student satisfaction with their living situation is driven most significantly by peer relationships. However, certain aspects of the facilities in which they are housed and factors that can be influenced by housing professionals drive this as well.

Learning communities are recommended as a high-impact practice by AAC&U (Kuh, 2008), encouraging students to ask big questions that resonate across a variety of the classes in which they have engaged. Living and learning communities build upon the benefits of learning communities by creating environments that encourage the integration of students' social and academic lives (Longerbeam, 2010). While the impact of living and learning communities varies based on the design, one study found that even the most basic type of living and learning community model yielded more positive outcomes than those observed in those who did not participate in a learning community (Stassen, 2003).

Career and professional development

Career and professional development not only prepares students for the workforce, it has also been cited as a factor that positively influences student persistence (Conner, Daugherty, & Gilmore, 2012; Lipka, 2008). A related high-impact practice recommended by the AAC&U is student engagement in internship opportunities which promote experiential learning (Kuh, 2008). Universities could situate themselves to better serve students by offering meaningful on-campus internship opportunities. Athas, Oaks, and Kennedy-Phillips (2013) recommend that academic and Student Affairs strengthen partnerships in the interest of creating employment opportunities on campus that students can relate to their academic goals. Fostering this type of environment for students provides them with unique career development opportunities within the learning environment. Whether or not the campus career center is organizationally positioned within student or academic affairs, Student Affairs professionals can encourage career development through student employment and internship opportunities, career-focused conversations and activities, student leadership positions and volunteer opportunities, and through partnerships with academic affairs.

Career and professional development is thought to influence persistence because of the benefits that arise through goal setting. An important part of Tinto's 1975 model for social and academic integration, goal setting strongly influences one's decision of whether or not to remain at the institution (Hull-Blanks, et al., 2005). Hull-Blanks, et al. (2005) found that first-year students with job-related goals were more likely to make decisions that positively impacted persistence compared to students who reported not having job-related goals. Having job-related goals encourages students to strive for high academic performance, particularly when the subject matter is related to their future aspirations. Some studies suggest that employment on campus (Cheng & Aleantara, 2007) or specifically, in divisions of Student Affairs (Athas, Oaks & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013), helped students shape and solidify their academic and career goals.

When considering employment during college and student retention, existing evidence is varied, in part due to differences

in statistical models and modes for measurement (Riggert, Boyle, Petrosko, Ash, & Rude-Parkins, 2006). While Horn & Malizio (1998) found that students who do not work persist at higher rates than those who work 1-15 hours per week, Klum & Cramer (2006) found that as the number of hours worked increases, so does the student's likelihood to persist. Multiple studies have suggested that working more than 15-20 hours per week has been found to have a detrimental impact on student persistence (Dundes & Marx, 2006; Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987; Horn & Malizio, 1998).

Findings from Dundes and Marx (2006) suggest a specific range of hours where benefits are seen, reporting that grades for students who work 10-19 hours per week were better than those who work less than 10 hours per week or more than 20 hours per week. Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley (2008) found no significant differences in grades for first-year students between those who work less than 20 hours per week (on or off campus) and those who did not work at all. Conversely, working more than 20 hours per week was significantly correlated with lower grades for first-year students (Pike, et al., 2008). While Pike, et al. (2008) found no differences in grades between those who work on or off campus, they did see higher levels of engagement in educationally purposeful activities for those working on campus, which positively contributes to persistence.

Some studies find that more benefits are seen in year-to-year retention with students who are employed on-campus compared to the affects seen for those who are employed off-campus (Astin, 1975; Nora, et al., 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Klum & Cramer, 2006). Additional evidence suggests that students who were employed on-campus have a higher probability of enrolling in postgraduate education as well (Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987). On-campus employment experiences could be intentionally enhanced to encourage more learning by weaving high impact practices (Kuh, 2008) into the fabric of student employment positions (Kuh, 2009). Employment during college is a complex area in need of more research to better understand the impact on persistence.

Summary

Several of the high-impact practices recommended by AAC&U are already woven into the work in Student Affairs. The evidence for Student Affairs contributions to student persistence presented in this paper is by no means comprehensive but was intended to offer an overview of the areas in which Student Affairs could focus inquiry to make a difference in promoting college student persistence. Student Affairs is a strong contributor to persistence and degree attainment, many Student Affairs professionals know this. By communicating this value to others, opportunities for working in unison across the institution can open up, creating a more cohesive experience for students who interact with and have to make sense of various aspects of universities.

Inquiry is a beautiful tool that, if leveraged effectively, can reveal evidence that will help the field grow and change as the students served and the conditions of the world continuously fluctuate. There may be high-impact practices that have yet to be identified, but the only way to discover them is by engaging in the practice. By further engaging in the same critical thinking and reflection that is known to be so valuable for our students, Student Affairs practitioners can re-situate their organizations to be truly student-centered. By practicing this, pathways to success for students emerge, promoting the larger vision of creating and sustaining a world in which all want to live.

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