How Belonging Effects Retention and Persistence Among First Year Students
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Background

Belonging in a higher education setting is defined as a student’s identification or positioning within the campus community that makes them feel valid, included and accepted (Tovar & Simon, 2010). While the impact of belonging on student retention has been understudied, there are connections that exist within academic literature and developmental theories. In the event that Oklahoma State University were to closely monitor the belonging of students and enact appropriate responses, it is possible that the retention rate of first year students would increase.

Literature

1. Belonging is a fundamental need, sufficient enough to drive human behavior or lack thereof (Maslow, 1954).
2. Research has shown that loneliness and feelings of isolation from the campus community is one of the largest causes of low belonging, and such feelings are most likely to occur in first semester for freshmen students (Elkins, Forrester, & Noel-Elkins, 2011).
3. Lack of belonging on campus could result in low academic performance, low levels of engagement, and potential student attrition (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
4. When students lack the fulfillment of community and belonging, the likelihood of student persistence begins to decrease (Brazzel, 2001).
5. Research at a large institution found that a student’s belief in belonging on campus held a positive relationship with intentions to finish a bachelor’s degree (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).
6. Student engagement in extracurricular activities, interactions with peers on campus, and meaningful faculty interactions have the biggest impact on belonging (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007).
7. While some literature exists about belonging’s influence on persistence decisions, the relationship has been severely understudied (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Theoretical Models

Strayhorn’s Theory of Belonging

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need
2. Belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient enough to drive human behavior.
3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, certain times, and among certain populations.
4. Sense of belonging is related to, and a consequence, of one’s belief that they matter.
5. Social identities intersect and affect college student’s sense of belonging.
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes like persistence, academic performance, and overall happiness.
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change.

Institutional Data

OSU Student Satisfaction Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Count</th>
<th>Question Title</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49.01%</td>
<td>% Your sense of belonging at OSU</td>
<td>Very Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.97%</td>
<td>% Your sense of belonging at OSU</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.34%</td>
<td>% Your sense of belonging at OSU</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.45%</td>
<td>% Your sense of belonging at OSU</td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.23%</td>
<td>% Your sense of belonging at OSU</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OSU Retention Rate

Positive and neutral/negative responses regarding belonging and the Fall 2017 retention data exist at a near 1 to 1 ratio.

Next Steps

1. Pay greater attention to the role your department plays in fostering belonging among students.
2. Conduct qualitative and quantitative research regarding sense of belonging and its relationship with persistence decisions.
3. Identify institutional programs or departments on campus that promote student belonging and properly market or advocate for them.

References