Exploring The Role of Service in Retention

So often we think of student retention as someone else’s problem or something that can only be addressed by professionals. What if students were involved in the process? What if students’ voices were heard by those responsible for planning or implementing retention strategies? The Office of the Registrar’s Academic Records team will help you understand service challenges we have faced and share some of the solutions we have learned. Learning outcomes include:

- Identifying barriers to service
- Understanding the student perspective
- Practical steps anyone can take to improve customer service and enhance the student experience.

The Problem

Sara’s Story

Sara was a first-generation college student at a well-known university. She completed her first year of college with funding from her personal savings account and no financial assistance from her family. When her sophomore year came around she completed her FAFSA and applied for aid, but did not qualify for any assistance. Even though she was independent, she was not able to get financial assistance as an independent student. Sara was not connected to a financial aid officer or given any additional options to find funding to continue her education. Since Sara was an independent first-generation student, she did not know that other options were available and she withdrew from the University.

How could Sara’s story be different so she could continue at the university? Could the institution have taken additional steps to provide services to help Sara better understand her situation and options moving forward? We think so.

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Barriers to service

- Student may not understand the problem they are facing.
- Student may not know who to help.
- Student may not know how to effectively express their problem or question.

Barriers that prevent student from providing service:

- Not listening for the key words
- Assuming what is being asked
- Being in a hurry

Can you relate? Most of us have encountered this type of scenario where we were passed around and never received the help we really needed. We generally relate this negative experience to only customer service settings, but students face this challenge on a daily basis. Below you will find some of the barriers to service that students encounter.

The Solution

How does OUmoxy company?

OUmoxy does not complete an exit survey, data is gathered when a student withdraws from the University. Withdrawal data does not account for students that cannot enroll before the start of the term or simply do not return, but it does provide a glimpse at the reasons students leave OU. 25% of students report withdrawing for reasons that could be related to a service. This suggests that OUmoxy could see an improvement in retention rates by taking steps to improve service and create a culture of care.

(Rasmussen, 2012)

A little theory goes a long way...

According to Timlin’s theory of student departure, a student’s voluntary decision to stay or leave a postsecondary institution results from a combination of the student’s pre-entry characteristics and the extent of their social and academic integration in the institution. The stronger the student’s level of social and academic integration, the greater the commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation (Schuh, Jones, & Torres, 2017).

A student’s interactions with the college community, including those with faculty and staff, impact the student’s perceived fit and social integration. Poor perceived fit and poor social integration can be the cause of students’ departures. By improving the quality of interactions between staff and students, we can increase perceived fit, increase social integration and improve retention, resulting in more student persistence which, in turn, leads to increased retention and graduation rates (Schuh et al, 2017).

Many students, and their families, don’t know how to navigate a university system because they lack the cultural capital. What is cultural capital? Cultural capital refers to a symbolic resource that can be used by an individual to maintain or advance one’s social status (Schuh et al, 2017). Students, especially first generation or those from a working class background, may not have had the exposure to prepare them to navigate a university system.

If a student walks out of our office feeling unappreciated, they have a choice to go elsewhere. Being committed to treating each student as an individual and not an ID number is one of many steps each Student Affairs professional needs to take on a daily basis.

We have the opportunity to be the connection for students. By changing the way we approach service, we can create a culture of care in which each student feels valued and important, which ultimately has a positive impact on retention. How do we do this? Keep reading.

For more information, visit:

- https://www.oregonstate.edu/registrar/academic-records
- https://www.gilfried.com
- https://www.thehardwarestore.com

Tips for listening (Schuh, 2017)

- Keep an open mind
- Listen without judging
- Listen without jumping to conclusions
- Try to put yourself in the other person’s situation
- Try to reflect what you hear

Ask questions to understand:

- What questions may lead people away from their original topic?
- If your question leads the speaker astray, get the conversation back on track.

Empathize:

- Put yourself in the other person’s situation
- Show that you understand what they are saying.

Summarize:

- Always restate instructions and messages to be sure all understand correctly.
- You’re the expert, don’t expect the student to have the same level of knowledge.
- Help the student find the right questions to ask.

Tips to help students form questions (Schuh, 2017)

- Ask leading questions
- Don’t ask yes/no questions
- Ask open-ended questions to gather more information
- Lead the student to ask the right questions

Give feedback:

- Show the student you are listening
- Show that you understand what they are saying

Resources