Fulfilling the University Promise:

Enriching the Art of Mentoring

with

Counseling Methods and Empirical Evidence

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Introduction

Over a quarter of a century ago the classic study by Astin (1975) reported that freshmen most likely to drop out of college were those with poor high school academic records, low aspirations, poor study habits, relatively uneducated parents, and small town origins. More recently, the national emergence of problems associated with immigration, substance abuse, poverty, and the migration of gang violence from urban to rural communities (Valencia, 2002) are impacting Astin's college drop out framework. Following the publication of the findings by Astin and endeavoring to learn from their own attrition experiences, many colleges and universities incorporated innovative approaches to better meet the diverse and growing needs of their students. One particular campus of the California State University system is a comprehensive metropolitan university located in the center of California's agricultural heartland. This campus is one of many universities incorporating approaches to better address the needs of their students and serves as the focus of this paper. Throughout the paper the campus will be identified as the University.

With a 2006 enrollment of 22,098 students, the University student body reflects the demographic diversity of the region. Of the total enrollment, 95% of the students were from California (IRAP, p.44). Reviewing the 2,602 first-time freshmen it was found that 35.7% of their parents had no college education (IRAP, Table 47, p. 48), and 28.5% of all students came from households with less than $24,000 annual family income (IRAP, Table 48, p.48). Of the total students enrolled at the University 49.8% are ethnic minorities as compared to 38% of the students who are self identified as White (IRAP, p. viii).

Typically, students arrive at the University with varying levels of academic preparation, speaking native languages other than English, with entry-level agricultural labor backgrounds, and who focus on cultural traditions that honor family responsibilities above all else. As an example of the varying levels of academic preparation, in a recent report of California's Academic Performance Index (API) rankings, two-thirds of the K-12 schools located in the six counties of the California Central Valley scored in the bottom half of statewide rankings (Fresno Bee, March 22, 2006, p. A1). Specifically, in Fresno County 66% of the schools fell in the bottom half of statewide schools, with 60% in Madera County, 83% in Tulare County, and 79% in Kings County.

It is not unusual to find students at the University being gainfully employed with family responsibilities and sharing many if not all of the characteristics reported by Austin (1975). Also, because of where they live and the circumstances surrounding their lives, students may also face the vast and complicating issues of immigration, substance abuse, poverty, and gang violence.

In response to Astin's drop out characteristics and cognizant of the expanded issues of immigration, substance abuse, poverty, and gang violence, efforts spanning three decades to promote freshmen student success were developed and instituted at the University. The efforts promoting student success included programs such as Educational Opportunity Program, College Assistance Migrant Program, the McNair Program, Freshmen Seminar, and, the Mentoring Institute. These programs focused on improving freshmen retention rates, and helping students to believe that they can persist throughout their undergraduate career, and ultimately, to graduate. Particularly, since its inception in 2005, the Mentoring Institute has recruited and trained 270 faculty and staff to act as mentors to first year freshmen of which 30.4% are Latinos (IRAP, Table 36, p. 34) with approximately one third (IRAP, Table 47, p. 48) arriving to campus as first generation college students.

At the University, with 49.8% of its student population being of Latino and other ethnic minority groups (IRAP, p. viii), the importance of academic support programs such as mentoring cannot be overstated. Mentoring at the University focuses on building relationships based on trust and integrity. In ethnic minority lifestyles, and particularly in Latino lifestyles, relationships within the family and in the community are easily among the most important elements that define the quality of life. Relationships that are honest, direct, and supportive are highly valued. Mentors at the University receive formalized Mentor Training Workshops (Valencia, 2007, Mentor Training Handbook) that encourages them to build relationships with their mentees based on trust and integrity. These mentoring relationships allow students to learn that what is important in their families and in their communities is also important on campus. Mentoring serves a vital role by contributing to student's sense of belonging, self worth, persistence, and ultimately to the concluding act of graduating (Light, 2001).

As the population of Latino students at the University and in the state of California increases, it is imperative that the graduation rates of Latinos keep pace. Otherwise, California faces the prospect of soon having a majority population that is not adequately prepared to participate and flourish in the mainstream labor market. This under preparation of Latino students is characterized as an economic time bomb (Valencia, 2002) where members of a majority population not possessing the skills to share and compete in a global market place inherit the lowest rungs on the socio economic ladder.

For Latinos, the short-term consequences of educational under-preparation will include a diminished array of career options and fewer choices in quality of life issues. The long-term

consequences of the under preparation of Latinos will be passed on to the next generation of children who will find themselves in dire economic circumstances. The University is committed to increase options for the next generation of children by using culturally appropriate and linguistically sensitive models to mentor students and assist them to persist in school and to graduate.

The Problem

When a student drops out of a college or university the impact is significant both personally and financially. According to Murphy and Welch (1993) attaining a college or university degree increases a persons earning power by 50 percent when compared with the earning power of non-graduates. Yet, a significant number of students leave the university before earning a degree, and, do not return. At the University an experience known as the "sophomore slump" manifests itself as students leave after they complete their first year. This slump also includes community college transfer students who enroll at the University and stop attending after their first year. While some students stop out and then return, this paper addresses the need to encourage students enrolled in our university to remain, to persist, and ultimately to graduate.

Depending on the source, university attrition rates (i.e., drop out rates) vary. According to American College Testing (1998) 32% of university entrants will drop out by the second year. Muraskin (1998) estimates a 50% university attrition rate while Tinto (1993) reports that 26.8 percent of students entering a four-year college and 44 percent of students entering a two-year college will not graduate. If the consequences of not graduating from college are so costly, why do students choose to leave before graduating?

There are many reasons for university attrition. For example Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) report that students leave the university for a combination of problems relating to emotional, social, and academic factors. In a second study, Tinto (1993) points out that while many students successfully adjust to their environmental changes, a significant number have difficulty in acclimating to the unfamiliar social and academic demands of college. From a third study, Weissman, Bulkowski, and Jumisko (1998) report that first year students experience confusion relating to the enrollment process, have concerns about finances and also about the need to balance their new college lives.

Attrition is related to a host of factors, At the University, factors that impact access, admission, academic progress, retention, and persistence have been well documented and are highlighted in the following section.

Factors Impacting Access, Admission, Retention, Persistence, and Graduation

According to information from the University's Office of Grants and Research and from the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning (IRAP) many factors served to impact student access, admission, academic progress, retention, and persistence. For the following review, nine factors are included. First, in 2006-2007, the University served 22,098 students in central California's San Joaquin Valley (IRAP, viii). Second, until the opening of University of California Merced in fall 2005, the University was the only public, 4-year, degree granting institution in a service area of 18,000 square miles. Third, over half of the school-aged children in the region live in rural, geographically isolated communities. Fourth, more than 80% of the students attending the rural schools are Hispanic. Fifth, over 70% of the students are from low-income seasonal farm labor families who are 1st and 2nd generation immigrants. Sixth, average round trip commuting distance to Fresno State is 80 miles.

Seventh, severely limited K-12 school resources in dozens of relatively small school districts that are located in 6 central valley counties contribute to low scores on the Academic Performance Index that are ranked in the bottom half of all California public schools (Fresno Bee, March 22, 2006, A1). Eight, low levels of formal education among parents contributes to low levels of participation in formal education by their children. Nine, considering that Hispanics are the fastest growing segment of the population in the central valley (Fresno Bee, August 9, 2007), other socioeconomic and cultural factors combine and contribute to the central valley having the lowest college going rate in California.

In summary, the data suggest that students who typically arrive at the University represent a diverse population of first generation university students many of whom have lived their lives in rural, geographically isolated communities. Seventy percent of our students, notably Hispanic, arrive with varying levels of academic preparation, speak native languages other than English, and attended K-12 schools having severely limited resources while also reporting some of the lowest scores on the California Academic Performance Index (API). A majority of students are from families with farm worker labor backgrounds who take great pride in cultural traditions that honor family traditions and responsibilities above all else.

The following section will present a review of the predictors of attrition among college students found in the literature. It is not surprising to note that many of the predictors are relatively common among first year students at the University.

Predictors of College Student Attrition

Offered in various combinations, the literature reports eight distinct factors that may serve as predictors of student attrition. The <u>first</u> factor that serves as a predictor of student attrition is the lack of academic confidence and the <u>second</u> factor is being a part-time student (Muraskin, 1998). The <u>third</u> and <u>fourth</u> factors are inadequate prior education and high school GPA (grade point average). The <u>fifth</u> factor is ACT scores (American College Testing Program) (McDaniel & Graham, 2001). The <u>sixth</u> factor is first generation college student status (Furr & Elling, 2002; Duggan, 2001; Hoyt, 1999; Weissman, Bulkowski, & Jumisko, 1998), the <u>seventh</u> factor is the need for remedial classes (Hoyt, 1999); and, the <u>eighth</u> factor that can serve as a predictor of student attrition is low socio-economic background (Furr & Elling, 2002).

For many first year students at the University the eight predictors of college student attrition are a common reality. Yet, for students who persist and graduate, there are also distinct factors that can serve as predictors for college student retention. The following section highlights factors that may serve to keep university students in school.

Predictors of College Student Retention

The literature reports eight factors that may serve as predictors of college student retention. The <u>first</u> factor reported as a predictor of student retention is academic self-efficacy and optimism (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). The <u>second</u> factor is the degree or level of student commitment (Tinto, 1993). The <u>third</u> predictive factor related to student retention is the student's involvement in extra curricular activities (DeNeui, 2003; Furr & Elling, 2002). The <u>fourth</u> factor is having parents who have earned college degrees. The <u>fifth</u> predictive factor is that the family unit is financially stable (Hoyt, 1999). The <u>sixth</u> factor related to student retention is that students live on campus (DeNeui, 2003; Hoyt, 1999). The <u>seventh</u> factor is the degree or level to which the student feels a psychological sense of community (DeNeui, 2003), and, the <u>eighth</u> factor related to student retention is involvement by students with peers and faculty in the college environment (Windschitl, 1998).

Before they arrive, university campuses typically have little to no control over the personal circumstances surrounding first year students. However, of the eight factors related to the prediction of college student retention, campuses can offer dynamic and innovative programs that leverage existing resources. For example, the University created summer residential settings like Summer Bridge, a Mentoring Institute, and a first year seminar. Collectively these programs, among others, serve to encourage and support students and are designed to build on the student's academic self-efficacy and optimism. In an effort to arrive at the "best practices" that contribute to increasing college student

retention and persistence, the following review of the literature is offered.

Best Practices to Increase College Student Retention and Persistence

According to the literature, there are many "best practices" to increase college student retention and persistence. The following groups of best practices were most commonly reported in the professional literature. Mentoring is item #14.

The set of best practices are as follows: First, enriching the first year experience (Ting, Grant, & Plenert, 2000; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999; Erikson, 1998; Windschitl, 1998; Berger, 1997; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997; Tinto, 1993). Second, intrusive advising (Weissman, Bulkowski, & Jumisko, 1998; Hurd, 2000; Baxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2002; Furr & Elling, 2002); Windschitl, 1998). Third, involvement in extra curricular activities (DeNeui, 2003; Summers, 2003; Furr & Elling, 2002; Zheng, Saunders, Shelly, & Whalen, 2002; Weissman, Bulkowski, & Jumisko, 1998; Tinto, 1993). Fourth, early entry-level assessment (Saunders, 2000). Fifth, remediation courses (Hoyt, 1999). Sixth, student-faculty interaction (Furr & Elling, 2002; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

The seventh factor mentioned in the literature to increase college student retention and persistence is effective teaching practices (Baxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2002). The eighth factor related to retention and persistence were students living in residential learning communities (Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002; Berger, 1997; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997). The ninth factor was learning communities as a concept (Summers, 2003; Zheng, Saunders, Shelly, & Whalen, 2002; Muraskin, 1998; Weissman, Bulkowski, & Jumisko, 1998; Dunwoody & Frank, 1995). The tenth factor was cooperative/active learning (Baxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2002; Thompson & Geren, 2002; Weissman, Bulkowski, & Jumisko, 1998). The eleventh factor related to retention and persistence is the freshmen year experience course (Furr & Elling, 2002; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999). The twelfth factor is holistic, multi- dimensional components (Fields, 2002; Furr & Elling, 2002; Muraskin, 1998). The thirteenth factor is first-semester freshmen year student orientation and bonding experiences with the institution (Woolsley, 2003; Fenzel, 2001; Weissman, Bulkowski, & Jumisko, 1998; Muraskin, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1992). Last, the fourteenth factor related to retention and persistence is support programs such as mentoring (Furr & Elling, 2002; Fields, 2002).

At the University, as on many of the California State University campuses, the reported best practices to increase retention and persistence are spread throughout an assortment of program endeavors in Academic Affairs and Student Services. At the University the presence of best practices can be characterized as a series of programs, many times isolated, that are encouraged to integrate into a unified, clearly articulated set of strategies. At the University, in 2005, to better articulate and unify strategies to assist in the retention and persistence of students the Mentoring Institute (MI) was created.

The Mentoring Institute is the first of its kind in the nation and is driven by the long-range goal of offering a mentor to new students and to evaluate the effectiveness of this endeavor. The responsibility of recruiting and training campus mentors, and evaluating the effort is under the auspices of the University Mentoring Institute. The Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs provides program funding.

The Purpose of Mentor Training

According to Light (2001) university student success is enhanced by matching new students with an informed and caring mentor. The immediate purpose of the Mentoring Institute at the University is to offer selected first year students a mentor who is recruited and trained from the ranks of the faculty, staff, and academically successful students. The guiding principle is that culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate mentoring will serve to assist all students, particularly historically underrepresented student populations such as Latino, Asian, and African American, to persist and to graduate.

The long-range purpose of the Mentoring Institute is to engage university faculty, administration, student service professionals, first year students, new, transfer and reentry students, and the University Mentoring Institute in a strategic program of culturally competent mentoring to improve rates of postsecondary participation, retention, persistence, and graduation. This project leverages existing collaborative arrangements with the Office of Student Success Services, Digital Campus, and other significant student service resources and funds in efforts to reduce university drop out rates, improve academic achievement, and increase the ability of university students to experience academic success.

Mentor Training: Integrating Counseling Methods with Mentoring

Since April 2005, Mentor Training Workshops have been delivered to 270 faculty, staff, and student participants. After successfully completing the Mentor Training Workshops participants are typically assigned 1-to-3 first-year students. Initially, the majority of the students were recruited from our freshman seminar course, University One, a 3-unit elective course. Students were invited to participate in the program and received a letter of invitation from the Provost. Later, in 2006-2007, the focus shifted to include 256 "at-risk" first year students who had grade point averages of 2.5 or below, scored less than 950 on their SAT, were "low income", parents having no college background, and, were not involved in any other campus support service.

The Director of the Mentoring Institute prepares, delivers, and facilitates the Mentor Training Workshops at the University. The Director is Associate Professor, Department of Counseling, Special Education, and Rehabilitation, and was recruited for special assignment by the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. The mentor training information is divided into three sections, and is offered in one 90-minute training session.

The first section of the Mentor Training Workshop is titled, "Introduction" and offers information regarding the cultural and historical traditions of mentoring, the role and expectations of mentors, and a discussion regarding ethical and legal boundaries. The first section concludes with a discussion focusing on the legacy and importance of mentoring.

The second section of the Mentor Training Workshop is titled, "From First Year Trauma to First Year Success". The initial part of this section speaks to the many issues that a first year student will confront including self-identity, social, family, and academic expectations, as well as time management, financial management, library competence, alcohol and drug abuse, and relationships. The second part of this section speaks to the many ways a trained mentor can assist first year students to navigate the labyrinth of university life.

The third section of the Mentor Training Workshop is titled, "Mentoring Skills". Incorporating themes from the counseling literature this section focuses on three areas. The first area encourages the mentor to become a skilled listener; the second area focuses on learning two techniques: "scaling questions" and the "miracle" question; and, the third area features the practice of interview skills using role-playing vignettes. The section begins with a discussion about mentoring as a Mentee-Centered relationship and concludes with the concept of unconditional positive regard. Participants at the mentor training workshops receive a copy of the Mentor Training Handbook, a list of campus resources and programs, and actual practice in interviewing skills. The interviewing skills are practiced with one participant playing the role of mentor and a second participant playing the role of student mentee. After the interview practice sessions the participants are encouraged to discuss what they observed, what they heard, and what they felt. Participants have commented that the practice interviews have been most helpful and worthwhile. At the end of the training sessions, the name of each successful participant is added to the list of eligible mentors. Much of the written information offered in the Mentor Training Workshop is posted on a web site along with a variety of academic and student service related links.

The Mentor Training Workshops emphasize that mentors aspire to become culturally competent, self aware, and respectful of the similarities and differences among and across our students and colleagues (see: Mentor Training Handbook, Valencia, 2005). The Mentor Training Workshops include direct examples and metaphors that are intended to assist in building respect and understanding between our diverse first year students and the mentors who wish to serve them.

In the fall and spring semesters, "Meet Your Mentor" events enable students to meet their mentors in an open, public place. Perhaps because we serve food at these events, the attendance is generally strong on the part of students. Of greater significance is the feedback that we receive from students, primarily females, who report that meeting a mentor, especially male, in an open, public place is more congruent with their cultural values. That is to say that it may be unrealistic

to expect a female student to initiate a meeting with an unknown male mentor in a private office. For students who have been raised in sheltered, loving, home environments, it appears from our anecdotal information that providing an open, public meeting place is a good first step in building trusting mentoring relationships.

The Benefits of Mentoring to the Mentor

In the spring of 2006, to determine the costs and benefits of mentoring, a confidential email survey was administered to 120 university mentors. The mentors were faculty, staff, and academically successful students at the University who were recruited and trained to mentor selected freshmen students many of whom arrived to campus under prepared by their K-12 experience. Sixty-two surveys were returned for a 51% response rate.   The purpose of the survey was to learn about the personal benefits, costs, and motivation to become a mentor.

The survey was a 10-item questionnaire that included both quantitative questions (forced choice) and qualitative questions (open-ended). Quantitative assessments utilizing a Likert response scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), were made of mentor perceptions of the mentoring experience including cost/benefits, desire to help underrepresented or first generation students, effectiveness with students that share ethnic/cultural background, and value of university recognition. Open-ended questions allowed mentors to elaborate on personal benefits, costs, and motivation to become a mentor. Notably, a majority of mentors made qualitative comments.

Results

Descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS (frequency counts, means, and standard deviations). In addition, graphics for each quantitative item were created and are available upon request (Executive Summary, Zelezny, 2006). Major quantitative findings:

- Mentors strongly agreed (6.25/7.00) that the benefits of mentoring outweigh the costs.
- Mentors have a strong desire (6.21/7.00) to help underrepresented or first generation students move toward educational success.
- Mentors did not agree (3.18/7.00) that they were more effective with students that shared their ethnic/cultural background.
- Mentors did not (3.36/7.00) value university recognition for mentoring.

Qualitative analyses revealed several important themes.
- Mentors most often reported they gained the most satisfaction from helping others and enjoyed working with students
- Mentors most often reported the greatest cost was time; however many viewed this as an investment not a cost. Some mentors reported that frustration,

disappointment, and emotional energy as a cost.
- Mentors were most often motivated because they wanted to help students. Many mentors reported having a mentor in their own educational experience. Other comments to evaluate:
- Mentors reported frustration with mentees that did not return calls or missed appointments.

Recommendations

Based on the Zelezny (2006) survey results the following recommendations were offered:

1. Focus on the greater benefits versus the costs; use the data as a public relations theme to recruit new mentors.
2. Facilitate veteran mentors to recruit new mentors. Capitalize on the power of person-to-person recruitment and referrals in the recruitment of new mentors.
3. Develop strategies to communicate with and support mentors who are frustrated by mentee no-shows.
4. Pairing a student mentee with a mentor who is ethnically and/or culturally different does not appear to be an important factor.
5. Because mentors report a desire to help underrepresented and or first generation students to move toward educational success, train mentors to be intentional, deliberate, and direct advisors.

Conclusion

One way for the University to fulfill its educational promise to the large, diverse Latino population living in its service area is to continue in its efforts to assist students to succeed and to graduate. In this regard this essay has attempted to outline the implementation of an idea whose time has come. Mentoring is a culturally appropriate method for first year students to learn how to navigate the complicated maze called university life. Mentoring gives back to the community and honors people who take time and energy from their life to mentor others. Data indicates that mentoring is beneficial to the student mentee as well as to the university-trained mentor. Lastly, the integration of counseling methods into mentoring allows mentors to understand that a student mentee who has missed scheduled meetings and has not answered emails and therefore does not deserve our compassion is someone who probably needs it the most.

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