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The Importance of Support Networks for At-Promise Students

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Keywords

at-promise, development, EOP, retention, support, under-prepared students

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT NETWORKS FOR AT-PROMISE STUDENTS

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Abstract

At-promise students enter colleges and universities with various challenges including being academically underprepared and lacking those essential critical thinking skills to be successful. However, providing support mechanisms within a nurturing environment can help these students overcome academic obstacles as well as personal challenges in order to achieve academic success. This article explores the role of an educational opportunity program and its efforts to support student success.



Introduction

Student retention, persistence, and graduation are common goals for institutions of higher education. Retaining students can be particularly challenging when students are academically underprepared, lack the necessary financial resources to obtain a college education, and struggle to adjust to the college setting. This article focuses on the educational opportunity program (EOP) at Bloomsburg University (BU), known as Act 101, and its practice of supporting students from a summer bridge experience until graduation. Act 101 is a centralized program, within the Department of Academic Enrichment. We work with a large population of first generation college students, many of whom are African-American, and we seek to help them make a successful transition to college. First generation college students have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education, have low socioeconomic status, and tend to require additional academic support in reading and math (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996).

Background

Act 101/EOP is a state funded program, at a predominantly white institution (PWI) located in central Pennsylvania. The program is designed to help students who are traditionally viewed as having a financial, educational, and in some instances a cultural disadvantage. Banks (2009) defined underprepared as “having attended underfunded public schools with limited resources” (p. 15). Act 101 students are considered “underprepared” or “at-risk” by university standards because of the lack of rigorous academic preparation that institutions of higher education have deemed as a requirement for success. Rose (1989) postulates that even though these students have experienced “less-than-privileged educations” (p. 193), they still deserve the opportunity to get a college education. Hence, the Act 101 program serves as a pathway for at-risk students to pursue their college aspirations.

Thus, the purpose of the program at BU is to provide a structured environment where underprepared students are holistically supported academically, financially, and personally. Perry (as cited in Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, 2003) describes EOP as a “carefully constructed environment that made it possible for program staff to routinely participate in the transformation of students into high academic achievers” (p. 3). For first generation college students developing a roadmap to graduation is critical. According to the Education Advisory Board (2016) 90% of low-income first generation students do not graduate on time. First generation college students face many challenges like paying for college, navigating college life, and having proper guidance and support. Therefore, the program also seeks to implement strategies to make certain that

students not only gain access to higher education but also persist and graduate with a college degree.

What We Do

Act 101 has been in existence since the early 1970s. The following is a list of requirements that have been traditionally required for admission to the program: 1) earning an 800 or higher on the SAT; 2) academic ranking in the upper half of the high school class; 3) 95% or better attendance rate in high school and 4) a letter of support from a guidance counselor or teacher stating how the student would benefit from the program. Upon acceptance to the Act 101 program a student is required to attend a six-week, pre-college summer bridge program, and the student is only invited back as a fall, first-year student if he/she successfully completes all of the requirements. In addition to recruiting students from rural and suburban parts of the northeast, many students are also recruited from the inner city of Philadelphia, PA. BU's program not only supports the recruitment of students who are underprepared and have the potential to do well academically, but also the retention and graduation of students by offering support networks via faculty mentors, peer mentors, academic counseling, and tutoring. It is through these networks that we work with the program students to increase their success while in college.

Boylan's (2002) research over time emphasized the need for colleges to not only provide research based instruction but also have effective support systems in place in an effort to promote academic success for the students enrolled in educational opportunity programs. Thus, the role of the institution is not only to provide access, but also create opportunities for success and develop meaningful support networks that contribute to an increase in retention, progression, and graduation.

Who We Serve

Perry (as cited in Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, 2003) asserts that underprepared students are seen as "not having the skills, behaviors, beliefs, or identities required for high academic achievement" (p. 3) prior to entering college. The argument from Perry reinforces the need for a summer experience to increase the academic preparedness of underprepared students. As noted by Cheese (2015), underprepared students should no longer be referred to as at-risk but in actuality at-promise and as a result, they should be given the opportunity to gain access to higher education and to receive support services (like intrusive advisement, tutoring, and mentoring) to assist them in being successful academically.

At-Promise

According to Matthews (as cited in Cheese, 2015), the term "at-promise" emerged almost two decades ago in a September 1997 Associated Press story focusing on a mentoring program for junior high students in Nebraska. Morton Sherman (as cited in Matthews, 2009), Superintendent of Alexandria city schools in Virginia, defined at-promise as a "term used to describe children who have the potential to achieve at a higher rate than they are currently achieving" (p. 1). For this reason, identifying students as at-promise permits the focus on deficits to become secondary, and empowerment then becomes the primary goal. The review of the literature has inspired the use of the term as another means of highlighting the benefits of using positive language to help motivate students. Furthermore, our purpose as educators is to motivate and provide a wide range of support networks to help students deal with the unique responsibilities, challenges they encounter, and make a successful transition to college.

Challenges

Many at-promise students enter college with various challenges, like being underprepared academically, lacking critical thinking skills, and having access to support mechanisms within a nurturing environment. Providing support is a key component in helping students overcome academic obstacles as well as other personal challenges that they may encounter while in college (Cheese, 2015). This constructive process coupled with the role of educators to be sensitive to the needs of students is confirmed by Boylan (as cited in Casazza & Bauer, 2006) who states, “it’s imperative to recognize that college is what takes place while life is going on” (p. 27). The challenges specifically faced by Act 101 students includes, but are not limited to the following: lacking academic confidence, social adjustment, lacking family knowledge and support, lacking financial resources, and learning how to interact with educators.

Lacking Academic Confidence

Stepping onto a college campus can be daunting when students have no idea what building to go to, who to ask for, and what questions to ask. The feeling is intensified inside the classroom. The lack of academic preparation makes students hesitant to speak up in class for fear of being wrong. Academic performance is hindered when students believe they cannot perform academically at a level that is expected for college. The belief is directly related to a student’s self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the ability to successfully perform given tasks. It also determines how much will be expended and how long effort will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984). Focusing on self-efficacy is vital because the more a student feels they cannot academically perform, the more likely they are to underperform, not perform at all, and drop out of college.

The more a student is motivated and encouraged, the more likely they are to prevail and continue in college. This idea was highlighted by Tinto (1993) when he stated the key determinant of persistence and success in college is commitment. If a student feels they have the ability to do the work, they will be motivated to continue their education despite adversities. Students have the ability to overcome academic barriers through proper motivation, guidance and support. Without the support to help their academic self-efficacy, often times students question if they belong in college at all. Feelings of belonging not only impact their academic performance, but their social adjustment to college.

Social Adjustment

Adjusting to college goes far beyond managing time and completing class assignments. Students need to feel not only academically capable, but also need to find their social space. Social adjustment includes connecting to campus clubs and organizations, fostering meaningful relationships with peers, understanding and utilizing campus resources, and managing the independence that comes with college life. For many students, living on a college campus is the first time they are away from home. Given these unique circumstances, it is imperative to help students feel socially connected to the campus community. Since students are away from home, they look to establish meaningful connections with other individuals. Interactions between students helps to develop stronger friendships (Homan, 1950) as well as a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging is vital, especially for students who enter college with financial and educational challenges. Without solid support networks students faced with these challenges tend to feel overwhelmed and are at a greater risk of dropping out of college.

Lacking Family Knowledge and Support

Support systems such as family, friends, campus community, mentors, etc. are some of the factors that can have a positive influence on the educational experiences of underprepared students. When the right support mechanisms are not in place, navigating college can be quite challenging. For example, first generation, underprepared students are faced with the difficult task of figuring things out on their own from the admissions process, completing the financial aid application and applying for scholarships, to deciding what necessities are needed for college. Lacking ways of knowing can negatively impact a student's ability to achieve intellectual and personal growth. This can ultimately hinder academic persistence and completion.

Successfully utilizing various institutional resources (such as mentoring, counseling, advising, financial assistance, and connecting to informal and formal spaces that students can easily identify with) can serve as a supplement to the supportive family that would help at-promise students overcome transitions that are difficult and ultimately create pathways for success. Another means of support for students is having the institution itself recognize that cultural traditions (such as religious or spiritual orientation, racial pride, music, dance, art, and storytelling) in the family and community exist and can also contribute to success in college (Beoku-Betts, 2000). Earning a college degree is even more challenging for students who are not only lacking family support but financial resources as well.

Lacking Financial Resources

Financial circumstances play a significant role in a student's decision to pursue a college degree, persist, and graduate (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Tinto, 1993). As a result, while some students have the privilege of focusing solely on their academics, oftentimes, at-promise students have no other choice but to seek employment (on or off campus) to help supplement their income and cover college expenses. The challenge for many of these students is learning how to create balance in their lives by juggling school, family, work, relationships, etc. Moreover, the students who are lacking family support are forced to rely on financial aid in the form of federal and state grants, scholarships, loans, and work study. Therefore, these students can be most effective academically if they learn how to manage their time, make an effort to seek assistance (from professors, tutors, advisors, and mentors), develop good study habits, and attend class regularly.

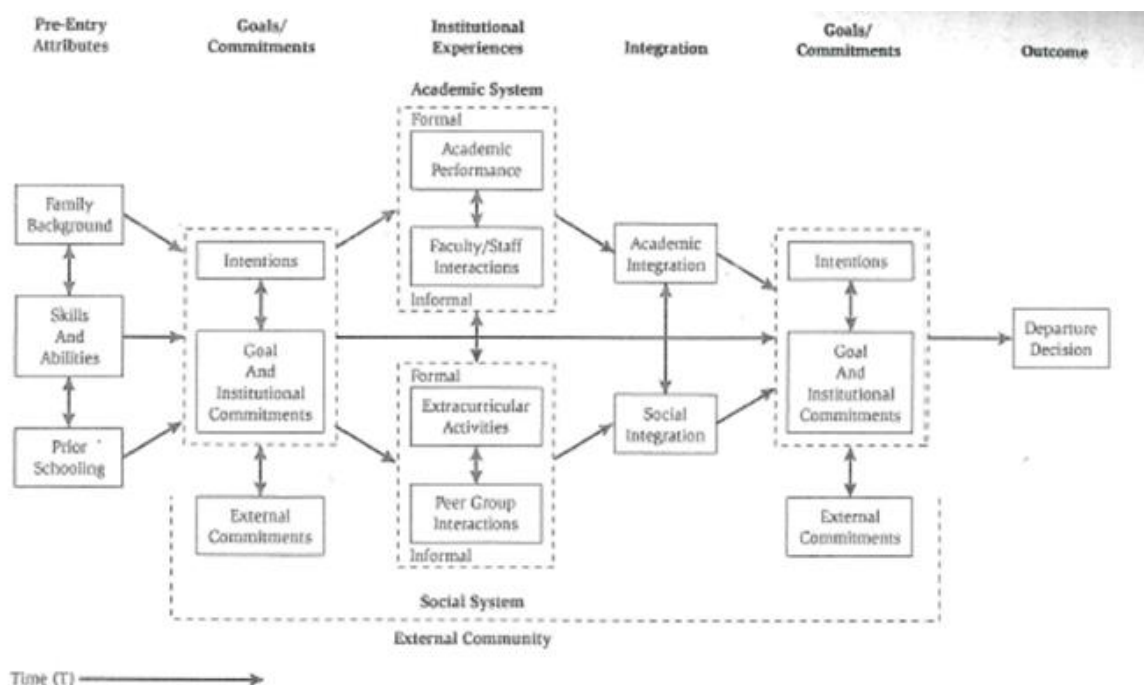
Learning How to Interact with Educators

Dealing with faculty and administrators who are unfamiliar with the developmental issues that at-promise, particularly African-American, college students face while attending a PWI can be challenging for students as they struggle to adapt to this new environment. Instead of at-promise college students directing most of their attention on achieving academic success, unfortunately they struggle to develop survival mechanisms such as dealing with stereotype threat and feelings of social isolation (Taub & McEwen, 1992; Steele, 2010). For programs seeking to work with such a unique population, it is vital to implement initiatives that properly address the needs of the underprepared student population. It is crucial that the programs take a holistic approach to work to build relationships which will encourage and motivate the students to actively engage and utilize the support services available. As educators, we have a responsibility to help students develop the skills necessary to overcome their adversities and still promote personal development. Act 101/EOP recognizes these challenges and specifically addresses them by incorporating a multi-layered model to help students be successful in college. Our support model is grounded in the work of Vincent Tinto.

Theoretical Framework

In an effort to address the challenges encountered by students in Act 101/EOP, we used Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (Figure 1). The model serves as a guide in developing a structured program that not only facilitates a student's transition to college but also maximizes their opportunity to graduate. Much like Tinto, Act 101/EOP heavily focuses on student engagement. Tinto's philosophy reveals that students are more likely to matriculate and graduate from college when they have a strong commitment to the university. The commitment is based on their academic and career goals as well as their integration into the campus community. Students will not perform well academically, or stay enrolled if they do not feel a part of the university. Act 101/EOP's philosophy over the years has been that the college experience goes far beyond going to class, studying, and spending time in the residence hall. As educators we have a responsibility to assist students in developing the skills necessary to become confident and active learners. This is an integral component of Act 101/EOP's mission to promote human development. In order to achieve this mission, we are dedicated to providing strong support networks for students.

Figure 1. Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure



Source: Tinto, 1993, p. 114. Copyright 1987, 1993 by the University of Chicago. Used by permission.

Support Mechanisms

At-promise students can achieve academic success when the right support mechanisms are in place. The need for support is especially true at PWIs where these students may experience culture shock and find it very difficult to adapt to college and at the same time do well academically. At-promise students find themselves figuring things out by trial and error if they lack proper support. Their parents are unable to help answer questions because they tend to be unfamiliar with the college process. Our experience coupled with research findings, highlight

that students need support in order to make a successful transition to college. In a study comparing parental and peer support, Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco (2005) found that peer support was a better indicator of college success than family support. The Act 101 program seeks to address this issue by providing a comprehensive support system, which is reinforced by the Tinto model. Our program provides peer, academic, and advising support services.

The program begins by bringing the students to campus in the summer prior to fall enrollment. The six week summer, academic intensive boot camp also traditionally encompassed enrichment courses in Reading, Writing, and Math. The six weeks afforded the students the opportunity to enhance their skills in a small class size. The structured summer program allowed students to get acclimated to the college schedule and learn time management skills. To further their academic success, students participated in an evening study hall Monday-Thursday in order to allow students to work both in groups and independently on class assignments. Study hall reinforced the importance of developing an academic routine. One of the components to the study hall experience was that it was led by a Program Assistant (PA). The PAs were integral to the success of the summer program, and were the first line of defense in regards to providing peer support to our students.

Peer Mentors

As mentioned earlier our students were paired with Program Assistants during the summer program. PAs must be current Act 101 undergraduate, upperclassmen students. The PAs were specifically trained prior to the start of the summer program. The training focused on the purpose of showing empathy, being a role model, mentor, and supporting incoming students. The PAs ate meals with the students, gave campus tours, lived in the residence halls, and were in charge of facilitating evening study halls. PAs were required to have and maintain a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 or higher. The GPA requirement was necessary as many of our PAs serve as supplemental academic support for Act 101 students.

The academic support was reinforced during the summer study hall sessions as well as during the academic year. Incoming Act 101 students maintained communication with PAs for help with writing, reading, and math enrichment courses. The peer interaction was very powerful because incoming Act 101 students easily connected to the PA. This means that in the beginning of their college career PAs sat in the same seats as the incoming first-year Act 101 students. Seeing an upperclassmen thriving in college, and serving in a leadership role allowed new Act 101 students to see that they can and will be successful in college. PAs established a meaningful relationship with incoming Act 101 students that lasted well beyond the first-year of college.

Faculty Support

The Act 101 office has employed a dynamic group of full-time and part-time faculty to work with students. All of the faculty offices are located in the same area as the Act 101 main office. Students who come to the Act 101 office can easily find the professors of enrichment courses, if they need assistance. The purpose of having faculty in the Act 101 office is that it increases the accessibility for the program students. Our faculty are not only accessible they are also passionate about what they do. Faculty devote extra hours in the evening to meet with students. They also provide additional tutoring before midterms and final exams. Our faculty are a dedicated team consisting of full-time and part-time individuals who seek to help program students thrive and survive while in college.

Academic Support

During the beginning of the summer program, all Act 101 students are assigned to an academic advisor. The academic advisors assist students with course selection, exploring different majors, and ensuring that they completed all necessary financial paperwork. The academic advisors play a major role in the educational experiences of students. Advisors work with students to develop an academic map which highlights specific courses students should be taking. In collaboration with students, advisors help explore majors, minors, and future career goals. Setting clear academic goals is critical to helping students stay focused.

Discussion

As stated earlier, Act 101/EOP specifically works to help underprepared students be successful in college. The program offers a structured summer experience that allows students to become familiar with college life before the start of the fall semester. Act 101/EOP benefits students by providing a variety of support networks to deal with the personal, financial, and social issues that college students may face. Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure reinforced the need for programs like Act 101/EOP. Students who feel connected and integrated into the campus environment are more likely to persist, be student leaders, and graduate. Integration, which is integral to Tinto's model, builds autonomy and reinforces to the student that they can succeed in college.

A key component of Act 101/EOP is the institutional support. The university not only supports the idea of helping underprepared students succeed in college, but they also provide funding for the program. The funding goes towards helping students financially and sponsoring cultural and educational field trips. The institutional support is essential because it demonstrates to students that the university is truly invested in their matriculation through college. Tinto's concept puts institutional support at the center of student integration. Incorporating Tinto's model ensures that Act 101/EOP and the university are working collaboratively to fully support students in their efforts to obtain a college education.

Implications

Administrators and faculty in higher education should take the lead when it comes to creating a space where students can experience a sense of belonging, successfully navigate the college environment, and utilize the support networks available in order to achieve academic success. At PWIs this endeavor is even more pressing when trying to meet the needs of underprepared at-promise students. Gilyard (1991) describes the experiences of students of color attending PWIs as a burdensome task of trying to fit in socially and at the same time manage the academic demands of college. Moje (2004/2011) suggests that the role of educators should be to "provide young people with opportunities to learn to navigate these spaces both strategically and tactically and to help build portfolios that allow them to access other spaces" (p. 37).

Educational opportunity programs have become the foundation for creating pathways for success for underprepared students. The additional benefit materializes when a summer bridge component is offered and this in turn develops into an effective way to establish structure and address the academic and social challenges that incoming freshmen may encounter. Acknowledging these challenges from the start, can influence academic performance and result in a positive impact on student retention, progression, and graduation.

Conclusion

Bloomsburg University's Act 101 program specifically works with at-promise students who are in need of both financial and academic support. Our program's framework focused on helping students make the transition to college by providing additional academic, financial, peer

and professional support. Act 101/EOP is deeply rooted in Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure. The reason it aligns with our program is because we seek to not only help students transition to college but make certain they are academically successful and graduate.

During the summer, the students have additional time to get adjusted to the campus community and begin to build their support networks. The time in the summer prepares students for the rigor of academic course work and heightens their sense of belonging as a college student. As stated earlier in Tinto's model, social integration into campus is a key component to student retention. Students need to feel supported by and connected to their campus. The Act 101 program assists students in building and fostering meaningful relationships with their peers and professionals. The relationships ensure that the students create a sense of community. The community aspect is vital to student retention and support because at-promise college students are living on their own for the first time. By integrating Tinto's model into our program's structure, we are helping at-promise students address and overcome the challenges that contribute to their inability to adjust to college, perform academically, and graduate.

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