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Enhancing Program Satisfaction and Retention Among First-Year Master of Arts in Counseling Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Student satisfaction and retention are key issues that have been understudied in graduate education programs. More specifically, it is unclear if the known factors that impact retention and satisfaction at the undergraduate level are similar for counselor education programs. This article presents results from a qualitative study exploring a first-year social integration program designed to impact program satisfaction and retention among students in their first year of a Master of Arts in Counseling program. Implications for graduate education programs are discussed.

Keywords: retention, student satisfaction, counselor education, social integration, learning communities

Student satisfaction and retention are key issues for college campuses across the country and have been written about extensively in the literature (Barefoot, 2004; Hamshire, Willgoss, & Wibberley, 2013; Mckendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014). National average retention rates fall in the 50% range for undergraduate populations (Nandeshwar, Menzies, & Nelson, 2011), with the first year being identified as the most critical time for students to determine if they are going to continue their education (Hamshire, Willgoss, & Wibberley, 2012). Although higher than undergraduate rates, the national retention rate for public university graduate programs of 69.9% (ACT, 2015) is still concerning. Not only does the loss of students reduce opportunity for personal and academic growth in society, attrition is a significant financial loss to colleges and universities (Barefoot, 2004; Hamshire et al., 2012; Nandeshwar et al., 2011).

While there are some examples of research into retention at the graduate level (Pontius & Harper, 2006; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003; Gardner, 2008), the majority of retention literature focuses on tools that are effective in increasing retention with traditionally aged undergraduate students. Those enrolled in graduate programs tend to be older and have more responsibilities outside of school, including families and careers. This is especially true in smaller, competitive programs, such as those that specialize in counselor education (Roach & Young, 2007; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014). Therefore, it is important to examine program satisfaction and retention factors specific to counselor education programs as they may differ from findings associated with undergraduate programs.

The counselor education admission process is both time-intensive and critical to ensure the most highly qualified candidates are chosen each year to begin the program. The application generally includes letter of interest, verification of academic aptitude and related experience, letter of references, and an interview (Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014). Once students have been accepted into a program with limited enrollment, it is important for students to want to stay enrolled and graduate. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify factors that positively impact program satisfaction and the intention to continue in the program among first year Master of Arts in Counseling students completing their first semester in the program.

Retention and Sense of Belonging

While many efforts have been made to find key factors associated with student retention, the consensus among researchers is that it is a problem with multiple causes (Hamshire et al., 2012). Of the multiple theories that describe the persistence and withdrawal behavior in higher education, the most comprehensive and well-known is Tinto's integration model (Tinto, 1975, 1997, 2006). This model examines how student perceived "fit" or "sense of belonging" contributes to retention. Tinto's model posits that students enter college with a constellation of unique characteristics that play a role in the decision to stay or leave the educational setting. The characteristics include family socioeconomic status, education level of parents, family expectations, race, gender, and academic ability. Experiences in prior educational settings may also play a role in college success. Further, the model emphasizes social integration, which includes associations with peer groups or cohorts, activities outside of the classroom, and connections with faculty. Researchers investigating Tinto's model indicate this feeling of "interpersonal

relatedness” has an impact on retention; however, the pathway to experiencing this feeling is not clear (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002).

The decision to leave an institution of higher education can take place at any time, but rates of attrition are highest in the first year (Hamshire et al., 2012). Researchers have found that the first year is also the most significant time for relationships to be established (Hamshire et al., 2012; Nandeshwar et al., 2011). These relationships may be formed outside of the classroom with other students and faculty, but they can also be formed in the classroom, which is an often overlooked domain. Students that take a more passive role in their education tend to be at greater risk for attrition; for students that are involved with multiple obligations outside of school, the classroom may be the only place where they build those relationships with students and faculty (Tinto, 1997).

The reasons why students do not continue their education are multifaceted and are impacted by overlapping and inter-related interpersonal, social, and environmental (e.g., campus) variables (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). Family expectations can deter a student from collegiate pursuits or can result in a sense of obligation for completing a college degree. Other factors that may prevent students from obtaining a college degree include difficulties obtaining financial aid, working long hours (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004), and perceived usefulness and applicability of one’s college degree (Park, Boman, Care, Edwards, & Perry, 2008). Faculty and/or staff-student interactions outside the classroom, mentoring, and student organization involvement also contribute to a student’s integration and degree completion (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004).

Studies at the graduate level support the positive influence of social and academic integration. In graduate programs, students want to experience partnerships with other academic units as well as receive consistent and accurate communication (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Social integration is especially critical for those students that do not fit into the traditional graduate student template since they may feel marginalized and may choose to depart from their degree program (Gardner, 2008).

The Current Study

The majority of the literature studying retention in higher education has focused on undergraduate students (Crombie, Brindley, Harris, Marks-Marin, & Thompson, 2013). While multiple studies examined the ethical practice of removing underperforming students from counselor education programs (Brown, 2013; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010), there is comparatively little research on student-initiated program discontinuation in counselor education programs. Tinto’s (1975) core concepts of academic and social integration at the undergraduate level are well-established, but have also strongly influenced student commitment to the continuation of education at the graduate level (Ethington & Smart, 1986). Tinto (1993) stated that the social communities established in doctoral programs are more highly related to academic integration than at the undergraduate level and not only relate to intellectual development, but also to program completion. The body of research into retention at the graduate level is still incomplete, however, and in particular, it is unclear if Tinto’s social integration model is applicable to graduate students in counselor education programs. Because the first year has been identified as the time when undergraduate students are at most risk for dropping out of school (Hamshire et al.,

2012), creating activities to increase social integration among first-year graduate students may also be important. Thus, the purpose of this study is to extend the literature by examining how first-year program activities designed to increase social integration impact program satisfaction and the intention to continue in the program among students in their first year of a Master of Arts in Counseling program.

To achieve this aim, all first-year students were invited to participate in a series of activities designed to increase social integration. These activities included a) a spring orientation dinner attended by all students in the program and faculty, b) a formal connection to a mentor in the second year of the program, c) a summer Counselors for Social Justice student organization community service project, d) a fall picnic for first-year students, their families, and faculty, and e) a fall meeting with the faculty advisor. First-year students were then invited to participate in focus groups in which they were asked about their experiences in these activities, as well as other aspects of the program, as they relate to program satisfaction and intention to continue in the program.

Methods

Participants

A total of 24 students admitted to a Master of Arts in Counseling program at a metropolitan university in the Northwestern United States were recruited through a mandatory first year fall semester course. Of the 24 students, 75% ($n = 18$) were female and 25% ($n = 6$) were male. Participants were comprised of school counseling students (75%) and addiction counseling students (25%). Ages of the participants ranged from 21–50 ($M = 29.7$, $SD = 8.06$). The majority of participants (92%) were Caucasian, with 4% Hispanic, and 4% Asian American. Of the students, 50% identified as first-generation college students.

Procedures

First-year students were recruited through a required fall semester course. The lead author, who is also a doctoral student, explained the purpose of the study to the participants, provided a sign-up sheet, and instructed students to sign up for a group of their choice based on students' schedule availability. Students were informed that participation was voluntary. Two 50-minute focus groups ($n = 12$; $n = 6$) were held across 2 consecutive weeks. The lead author conducted the informed consent process and explained the purpose of the study, procedures for audio recording and transcription, and methods to protect confidentiality. In each group, the lead author asked participants four open-ended questions: 1) Tell me about what you believe has contributed to your desire to continue in the counselor education program; 2) Describe the activities so far that have impacted your sense of satisfaction with the counselor education program; 3) What other activities or experiences outside of the ones offered have contributed to your desire to stay in the counselor education program?; and 4) What other activities or experiences outside of the ones offered have contributed to your sense of satisfaction with the counselor education program?

Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was used to identify themes in data collected from the focus groups. Data were analyzed using structural and in vivo coding (Saldana, 2009). Structural coding was used to analyze the number of references to specific program activities, including an all-student program orientation dinner, peer mentoring, a summer community service project, a first-year picnic, and faculty advising. In vivo coding referenced the exact wording used by participants to describe their individual and shared experiences. The recordings were transcribed word for word, distinguishing participants only by gender. Participants' names that were stated in the focus groups were not listed in the transcripts to maintain confidentiality.

The constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965) was used to analyze the data. This approach includes comparing one statement or theme to other statements or themes to assure that all data produced will be analyzed rather than potentially disregarded on thematic grounds (O'Connor, Netting, & Thomas, 2008). Data were examined by noting themes and recurrences, which included repeated coding, comparing, and disaggregating and re-aggregating data into themes, resulting in a final set of identified themes when no new themes emerged through this process (Creswell, 2013).

Results

The focus groups provided opportunity for students to share feelings and experiences about the program from orientation to the end of the first semester of their program. The focus groups were transcribed and analyzed for common themes and comments from students in the groups. Four core themes emerged during analysis of the transcriptions:

- Connection with students in their cohort
- Trusting relationship with faculty
- Social integration activities
- Classroom activities and personal growth

Connection With Students in Cohort

Overall, the responses regarding the relationships that students have formed with each other permeated most of the discussion in the groups.

- *I have actually grown to really love this group, and I just feel privileged to be among them because I'm learning so much from them just human being to human being.*
- *In a weekend class, we had an opportunity to hear everyone speak so we were able to get a feel for each other. That's where the relationships started and connections started to be made for me. We're all here for the same reason and the same goal.*
- *We're a large group with different perspectives, but feeling comfort with people allows you to fully express how you feel and if I thought there was going to be a lot of judgment it would be harder to open up and it wouldn't feel safe.*

- *I feel being part of a cohort like this is a great way to learn counseling skills together. We're nice to each other, we try to take in everybody's values without judgment, and it's a great preparation for us to be counselors.*
- *We are all different and think differently and that's a huge benefit. Differences are actually beneficial in creating unity.*
- *I want everyone to succeed and if someone is struggling, I want to help them. I want us all to make it through and graduate together.*
- *When I talk to other people, I use the words "My Cohort" and I think it's awesome that we have that name and we're going to be friends for the next three years and we'll have a fountain of people to choose from for future professional consultation.*
- *I like the cohort system. I interviewed at another university that doesn't do a strict cohort system and that's one reason why I chose this program.*

Trusting Relationship With Faculty

Students commented about the positive aspects of the different instructors that were teaching their classes their first semester.

- *All of our professors are very genuine and they want to help us succeed and learn and do well.*
- *The faculty provide a classroom experience that is very collaborative and that's been really fun.*
- *The instructors are great and create an environment for us where we really bonded. I was able to let my guard down a little bit and got to know my classmates better.*
- *I feel like the instructors take care of us and they ensure that we're going to be successful with the program.*

Social Integration Activities

The activities put in place for the students to provide greater social integration both before and during the semester provided opportunities to be with each other in a non-academic setting. Students primarily discussed the community service project and picnic.

- *The picnic was a good way to be introduced into the caring, welcoming atmosphere of the program. This program is unlike most others on campus.*
- *I really liked the service activity (community service) because that's where I got to meet so many other classmates. To be able to do the service project (community service) with so many future classmates made coming to class the first time less scary.*
- *I thought that the service activity (community service) was the most beneficial experience I had outside the classroom.*
- *I feel that the service activity (community service) helped to solidify the bond that we have. I feel like the more I get to know my cohort and the peers that I'm around – I'm around them as much as I'm around my husband, and so I appreciate getting to know them differently in a setting other than the classroom.*
- *Something I really liked about the picnic was that I got to meet the families, spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, and kids that are influencing our cohorts' lives.*

- *The picnic was great because my wife got to meet some people and she really clicked with people there and it was really fun for her and the kids.*
- *In class you tend to gravitate toward people who are very similar to you and the picnic was a chance to hang out with people you wouldn't normally hang out with and see a different side.*

Classroom Activities and Personal Growth

Students indicated the content of the courses, as well as the emphasis on personal growth, were also highlights of the program.

- *Being in the program and actually learning about the field and the profession has really increased my desire to want to continue in the program.*
- *I learn something in one class and then something else in another class and it snowballs and I want to learn more and more. We're building a great foundation and I'm looking forward to building on it.*
- *The program is very hands on and relevant to what we'll be doing in future classes and in our careers.*
- *The program really advocates for individual clients, systematic changes, and the counseling profession in general. I think that's really cool.*
- *Everything is like a puzzle. It all just starts to fit together even though at the beginning you have all these pieces and you don't know where anything goes. As the semester continued, the puzzle pieces just kinda started to get in place. That's what I like about how this program is built.*
- *At my work we did an activity where we had to write down our happiest moments from the last week. The ones that came up for me were times in my counseling courses. This is making me happy and is what I want to do. That insight is also motivating me to continue in the program.*
- *We talk a lot about being genuine and being congruent and this program really forces you to figure out how to become congruent and I'm not yet. It's putting me in the right direction and it makes me want to finish this program so I can help other people with that as well.*
- *I feel that I'm learning a lot and have more insight about who I am and why I'm doing the things I'm doing. Trusting the process and being okay with that is something I've never done before in my life and I can't wait to see who I will be at the end of the program.*
- *I used to consider myself pretty judgmental and I find that I'm testing myself more on my own belief systems. I'm excited about learning skills and techniques.*
- *The amount of personal growth is really satisfying and exciting.*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore factors related to program satisfaction and retention among first-year Master of Arts in Counselor Education students. During the focus group experience, students reflected upon program activities as they related to satisfaction and intention to continue the program. The primary themes of connection with other students in their cohort, relationships with faculty, classroom activities, and

the emphasis on personal growth emerged. Student comments reflected the importance of “social belonging” fostered through activities promoting connections with peers and faculty both inside and outside of the classroom. Thus, results provide support for the application of Tinto’s social integration model (Tinto, 1975, 1997, 2006) to counselor education students.

Of the activities designed to increase social integration, students identified the first year cohort-faculty picnic and the Counselors for Social Justice community service project as the most helpful in fostering connections to faculty and students in their cohort. These results are consistent with the undergraduate literature (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004), identifying a positive relationship between student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom and student organization involvement. Student comments also reflected the importance of classroom experiences, placing less emphasis on the one-to-one advising meetings. Contrary to the literature (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004), results did not indicate a relationship between the formal mentoring program and a sense of social belonging, program satisfaction, or the intention to continue in the program. The all-student program orientation dinner was also underrepresented in comments regarding social integration. Instead, students identified the cohort model as instrumental in feeling connected to other students in the program.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study contributes to our understanding of factors that enhance program satisfaction and retention among counselor education students, several limitations deserve note. First, the sample size was small and there was variation in size of the two focus groups. Although similar content was expressed in both sessions and the groups were equally talkative, there was more opportunity for everyone to share in the smaller of the two groups. Additionally, the sample was primarily Caucasian and female. Thus, this study did not examine the role of multicultural factors on program satisfaction and retention. Future research with more diverse samples is warranted. Future research examining other types of activities would also be meaningful. In particular, there may be other ways to engage first-year students with mentors that leads to higher levels of connectedness than we found in this study. Additionally, collecting quantitative data to measure the unique impact of different activities on satisfaction and actual rates of retention would add to the literature in this area.

Counselor Education Implications

This study has important implications for counselor education programs. Findings indicate that program activities created to increase program satisfaction and retention need to foster a sense of connection with others. Relationships with other students in their class, relationships with faculty, and the emphasis on personal growth within the classroom were key factors that influenced student connection to the program. Further, being part of a cohort emerged as one of the most prominent indicators of feeling connected to other students. Peer mentorship by second-year students and the all-student program orientation dinner were seen as less valuable, suggesting intra-cohort student activities may be more effective in promoting satisfaction and retention than inter-cohort

activities. Additionally, results suggest that it is the relationship and sense of connectedness, not the specific activities, that increase program satisfaction and intention to continue in the program. Findings indicate that students establish meaningful relationships with those involved with their program through learning communities, community service, and cohort gatherings. Thus, implementing programs that contain cohort-specific activities that build connections among students and between students and faculty provides a promising approach to increasing satisfaction and retention among students in counselor education programs.

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