Engaging Faculty in Retention Strategies Through the Practitioner-as-Researcher Model

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Abstract – Much research has been done on the valuable role faculty play in implementing retention initiatives. However, there is limited research – especially at the community college level where research endeavors are not a part of the job description – about what inspires faculty members to become interested in retention efforts and engaged in retention research. Utilizing a case study approach, one Arts and Sciences Department at a community college in northern Maine was examined to better understand faculty perceptions of and participation in retention initiatives. Using the framework of the practitioner-as-researcher model, this paper addresses two questions: How and why faculty were invested in implementing and assessing retention efforts at the college? What can institutions do to encourage faculty to participate in retention strategies and support them once they are invested? This paper is divided into three sections: (1) an overview and examination of the results obtained when instructors engaged in retention efforts centered around three configurations of learning communities; (2) a discussion of the benefits reported by faculty members who participated in these communities; and (3) recommendations for institutions to increase faculty engagement and commitment to retention initiatives.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, post-secondary institutions have studied the impact of retention efforts and determined that initiatives such as learning communities and first year programs increase student retention. Unfortunately, at some institutions such retention efforts have become merely "add-on" courses (Tinto, 2007). Given the current climate of financial constraints and increased accountability, institutions need to approach retention in a more comprehensive manner. "Changing long-held views within an organization concerning the importance, or lack of importance, that should be placed on student retention as a strategic issue begins with individual stakeholders. Over time, efforts to impact stakeholder perspectives result in changes in organizational culture and in new approaches for dealing with strategic issues" (Mclaughlin, Brozovsky, & Mclaughlin, 1998, p. 3). Change at an organizational level will be required for institutions to address student retention in a meaningful way.

All stakeholders must be a part of the retention process for institutional change to occur. In order for institutions to increase their retention levels and establish new retention benchmarks, it will be imperative to engage their largest stakeholders: the faculty (Siegel, 2011). To better understand student retention from a strategic point of view, it may be beneficial for faculty members to change the perception of their role from the traditional view of disseminators of information to that of being participants involved in a commodity exchange. If the customer (the student) is not happy, that customer may either seek educational services elsewhere or leave school altogether. Both alternatives, transferring or dropping out, have significant financial repercussions (Jamelske, 2009; Siegel, 2011). Although the idea of "student as customer" may not be a perfect analogy, it is important for faculty members to realize that their performance in the classroom does impact an institution's bottom line.

Much research has been done on the valuable role faculty play in implementing retention initiatives. However, there is limited research – especially at the community college level where research endeavors are not a part of the job description – about what inspires a faculty member to become

interested in retention efforts and engaged in retention research. In her article "Engaging Faculty in Retention: Finding Traction through Accreditation," Caryn Chaden articulates:

> At most institutions, faculty are rarely asked to think about their activities in light of institutional graduation rates. Traditionally, they have been hired to teach courses in their discipline, along with conducting research and service, and they have enjoyed the freedom to accomplish that task as they see fit. While many care deeply about the success of individual students, they typically have not been asked to consider what role they might play in improving institutional graduation rates, or what institutional impact coordinated efforts might have. (2013, p. 92)

Chaden suggests that in order for faculty to shift their thinking about retention, institutions must make it a higher priority for them. Even with such a shift, what is it that encourages faculty to buy into retention initiatives and participate in researching their effectiveness?

One obstacle in engaging faculty in retention initiatives is that many faculty members feel disconnected from them. In many institutions, retention efforts are analyzed by institutional researchers or academic support offices with little connection to the students or faculty members implementing those retention strategies (Siegel, 2011). This approach is unlikely to garner the faculty buy-in required to reach retention goals.

A possible solution to this problem is to invite faculty to design, deliver, assess, and revise the retention initiatives themselves. This type of grassroots approach increases the chances that faculty will be invested in the execution of the initiative and will be more likely to commit to its success. A natural extension of this ownership is faculty researching the outcomes of the initiative. Labeled as the practitioner-as-researcher model, "individuals conduct research about their own institutions, and by doing so they acquire knowledge that they can use to bring about change in these institutions" (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman & Vallejo, 2004, p. 112). Though faculty at four year institutions are often involved in research, in most cases, these research efforts are not aimed at retention assessment; in the community college setting, most instructors are not engaged in research of any kind. According to K. Patricia Cross, engaging in classroom research "encourages teachers to use their classrooms as laboratories for the study of learning" and then implement those changes to effect better learning for the students (1996, p. 406). The practitioner-as-researcher model closes the loop in faculty ownership of retention initiatives.

Utilizing a case study approach, one Arts and Sciences Department at a community college in northern Maine was examined to better understand faculty perceptions of and participation in retention initiatives. Using the framework of the practitioner-as-researcher model, this paper addresses two questions:

1. How and why were faculty invested in implementing and assessing retention efforts at the college?
2. What can institutions do to encourage faculty to participate in retention strategies and support them once they are invested?

This paper is divided into three sections: (1) an overview and examination of the results obtained when instructors engaged in retention efforts centered around three configurations of learning communities; (2) a discussion of the benefits reported by faculty members who participated in these communities; and (3) recommendations for institutions to increase faculty engagement and commitment to retention initiatives.

Overview of Retention Initiatives at Northern Maine Community College

Northern Maine Community College (NMCC), a Title III designated institution, is a rural, two-year community college serving approximately 1000 students. Two of the three learning communities discussed in the next section were designed to address retention among NMCC's Liberal Studies students, and the third was designed for conditionally admitted students in all programs. These student groups have been identified by the college as being at high risk for dropout or academic dismissal.

Since 2011, NMCC has developed three configurations of learning communities to try to increase retention among what the college identified as high-risk, first-year students:

1. Beginning Fall 2011, the college implemented a grant-funded learning community for Liberal Studies TRIO students.
2. In Fall 2013, a one-credit College Success course was adopted as a requirement for all Liberal Studies students.
3. In Summer 2014, an 8-week, one-credit SMART Start program was implemented for 21 conditionally-admitted NMCC students.
4.

Examination of Faculty-Led Assessment of Retention Initiatives

To measure the impact of these three learning communities, faculty members gathered and analyzed data that would indicate whether or not the intervention strategies were effective. Faculty members measured data in two ways: (1) a comparison of retention rates for the target population (TRIO and College Success students) and NMCC's general population over the course of seven years and (2) a comparison of GPAs and retention statistics for SMART Start students and all Conditionally Admitted Students over the course of two semesters. Though still in its early stages, data suggests that NMCC's learning community efforts are increasing retention numbers and enhancing the college experience for first-year students, at least in the short term.

Retention Discussion and Results

To measure first-semester retention outcomes with the TRIO and College Success learning communities, faculty members examined three Fall semesters (2008-2010) of longitudinal academic dismissal data to establish a baseline for the college's Liberal Studies students. The information was then compared to the data for 2011-2014 academic years when first the TRIO Learning Community and then the College Success cohorts were established. The goal of this analysis was to identify if Liberal Studies students enrolled in the learning communities were retained at a higher rate than past groups. Though it will require several years of data to determine the effectiveness of the program, preliminary analysis indicates some positive results.

Table 1 provides a comparison of academic dismissal rates for all NMCC students, Liberal Studies students, and students participating in the TRIO Learning Community. The Liberal Studies Students column (the middle column) includes students enrolled in College Success for the years 2013 and 2014. This is one way of measuring retention and success for Liberal Studies students.

Table 1. *Fall Semester Academic Dismissal (AD) Rates for Liberal Studies Students*

Year	All NMCC Students on AD List Fall Semester	Liberal Studies Students Percentage of AD List Fall Semester	TRIO Learning Community Percentage of AD List Fall Semester
2008	5%	35%	--
2009	3.3%	51%	--
2010	3.9%	43%	--
2011	3%	43%	18%
2012	4%	52%	2%
2013	3.1%	44%	8%
2014	3.5%	42%	0%

The TRIO Learning Community students seem to be significantly benefiting from their intervention. The reduction in academic dismissal for TRIO students versus the overall population of Liberal Studies students demonstrates that the TRIO Learning Community yields positive results.

Looking at overall retention numbers also suggests these interventions may be having a positive impact on the larger population of Liberal Studies students. The Liberal Studies cohort group for 2013 shows an 8% decline in percentage of students on the academic dismissal list (from 52% in 2012 to 44% in 2013). There was a 2% decrease in 2014 for the Liberal Studies cohort. Though the decline in students on the academic dismissal list was less dramatic in the second year of the initiative, this number becomes more significant when examined against the increase in percentage for the entire school population on the academic dismissal list for Fall 2014. Between 2013 and 2014, the overall number of students on the Academic Dismissal list increased from 3.1% to 3.5%; however, the percentage of Liberal Studies students in that group decreased. If this trend continues over time, it may indicate that the College Success course is having a positive impact.

The evaluation of the SMART Start program was twofold: a comparison of GPAs between SMART Start Students and all Conditionally Admitted Students for one semester (Fall 2014) and retention percentages for these two groups into the Spring 2015 semester. Though there is only one semester of data, the results indicate that the SMART Start Program had a positive impact on the affected student group. Table 2 summarizes the SMART Start program outcomes.

Table 2. *SMART Start Program Retention Rates and Success*

Goals	SMART Start Students	All Conditionally Accepted Students
Enrolled in Fall 2014 Semester	88%	71%
Finished Fall Semester in Good Standing	89%	72%
Average GPAs	2.03	1.95
SMART Start Students who completed the semester average GPA	2.30	2.1
Retained into Spring 2015 Semester	77%	50%

The objective of this analysis was to see if the SMART Start program led to the retention of conditionally accepted students at a higher rate. Of the 18 students who persisted in the program, seven (39%) achieved a passing mark on the re-take of the Accuplacer and were able to advance to the next level, either a developmental course or college-level course. Even the students who were not able to meet the Accuplacer cut-off score made significant gains in their percentile scores. The average gain was 17 percentile points.

Thirteen of the 18 (72%) persisting students earned a passing grade in the one-credit, COL 103 College Success course. The instructor noted marked improvement in students' writing skills based on journal entries that were assigned throughout the program. Sixteen of the 18 students enrolled in the Fall 2014 semester, and 14 of the 18 students persisted to the Spring 2015 semester. These numbers are significantly higher than those of conditionally accepted students who did not take part in the SMART Start Program.

Discussion of Benefits Reported by Participating Faculty Members

Although the student benefits of some retention initiatives, most notably learning communities, have been highly researched and documented, research about the impact of retention activities on faculty members is relatively new, especially at the community college level. Understanding such benefits may help institutions by acting as an incentive for faculty members to participate in retention activities, thereby promoting the institution-level changes required to make student retention a priority to all stakeholders. Preliminary research suggests that participating in retention activities, specifically learning communities, benefits faculty in a number of ways.

Jackson, Stebelton, and Lannon, in their article "The Experience of Community College Faculty Involved in a Learning Community Program" examined the impact of participation for faculty. They identified four main benefits to faculty in their study: "(a) creating empathy and greater awareness, (b) building authentic student relationships, (c) engaging in the larger campus community, and (d) promoting active collaboration and professional development with other faculty members" (2013, p. 9). These four benefits created a greater sense of job satisfaction for the faculty members involved in the retention initiative.

Another widely reported element of job satisfaction for community college faculty is student success. Faculty want to work with students who are engaged, who are focused on their education, and who make progress. John Murray and Sean Cunningham (2004) conducted a study to determine what attracts faculty to rural community colleges. In the article "New Rural Community College Faculty Members and Job Satisfaction," they report that "Overall the participants reported high levels of satisfaction with their roles as community college instructors. When asked what brought them their greatest satisfaction, both male and female faculty members often stated it was working with students" (2004, p. 28). This aspect of faculty engagement and satisfaction seems to be enhanced when faculty couple instruction with dedicated retention activities and assessment measures. The interviews with participating faculty members at NMCC corroborate these findings.

Faculty Participants' Views on Retention

Faculty participants in NMCC's recent retention initiatives were asked to describe their views of student retention by completing a series of five, open-ended interview questions in an anonymous, online survey. It is important to remember that all of the respondents were full-time Arts and Sciences faculty members who voluntarily participated in retention strategies. Their responses revealed several themes that demonstrate how faculty perceive institutional retention initiatives and their participation in those activities. Understanding this may be helpful for institutions that need to engage faculty partners in retention strategies.

When asked about their motivation to participate in the retention activities at NMCC and the resulting benefits, faculty members reported a deeper awareness of their students' situations and more rewarding relationships with them. In the words of one faculty member:

> I really enjoyed the [College Success classes] as I was able to instruct students outside of my program. Many of these students had varied and amazing backgrounds, but little understanding of their own learning styles or the "common" things that you would (mistakenly) assume that people of this age would know – time management or costs of living – and for the most part, they were agreeable and eager… Most beneficial for me was the opportunity to use various teaching strategies to connect with these learning style-varied learners.

This faculty participant identifies the opportunity for getting to know individual students as a central benefit of teaching College Success. These relationships, and the resulting opportunity to watch students grow and succeed, were a common thread through the interview responses.

Similar sentiments are echoed by an Arts and Sciences faculty member who was an instructor to the TRIO Learning Community:

> I am a teacher and I want my students to learn. Two of the main obstacles to learning are isolation and lack of mentors. When it became clear to me that Liberal Studies students lacked a cohort to bind them together as a learning community and they were not connecting to their advisors in a way that was meaningful, I seized the chance to make it happen. As a teacher, I am in a helping profession and this project has put me into a position where I can help those who are willing to be helped. Finally, I enjoy the faculty-student relationship. I benefited from good faculty mentors when I was an undergraduate and I would like to pass it on. I enjoy the relationship that I have with my Liberal Studies advisees; I enjoy working closely with students as they learn and advance toward their educational goals. Participation in the TRIO project has also helped me to better understand the obstacles that students face and put me in a position to make a meaningful contribution to the overcoming of those obstacles.

This response demonstrates that helping individual students overcome obstacles is rewarding and can also help faculty members recognize larger trends in their institutions, as evidenced by this respondent's desire to address an issue shared by Liberal Studies students as a group.

Finally, the faculty member who helped design the SMART Start program cited connecting with students as a benefit, as well:

> I agreed to participate in SMART Start because I know how important making personal connections with students is, when it comes to retention. Those personal connections are the benefits for me. When [the Dean of Students] and I met with some of the SMART Start students to debrief at the beginning of the spring semester, he commented that it was evident how "connected those students are to you". That's the name of the game for me. For some of our students, who haven't had a lot of successes in life, just breathing belief into them is enough for them to persist.

The rewarding relationships faculty members were able to experience with students may have helped shift their thinking about student retention at an institutional level.

These same faculty participants were asked whether or not they perceived retention as a primary job responsibility. Not surprisingly, faculty members who participated in retention activities did feel that it was a primary job responsibility. One faculty member wrote, "Helping students succeed includes retaining them." Another stated, "Retention is an extension of faculty members' teaching responsibilities. Faculty are responsible for ensuring that students are engaged and are more likely to understand the content being presented. When this happens, retention naturally follows." If the majority of faculty members at an institution echoed these sentiments, it could result in a powerful impact on retention and graduation rates.

Furthermore, when faculty members feel that retention is a central focus of their job, their course design and classroom practices are impacted. The faculty participants in NMCC's retention initiatives identified several course-level retention strategies that they now employ across their courses to support student retention:

- Attendance – provide clearly stated attendance policies; award points to students for attending class and participating rather than taking away points for missed classes; incorporate attendance as a graded portion of each student's course average
- Assessment – emphasize objective forms of demonstrating knowledge; utilize competency-based testing; use high feedback/low stakes assignments at the beginning of a course so all students can experience success
- Content Management – provide a greater breadth of online resources for coursework; offer supplemental materials for students who need additional instruction
- Relationship Building – engage in frequent contact with students; build one-on-one time into courses through conferences; encourage student-faculty communication; increase advising efforts through consistent meetings and contact

The two faculty members who participated in the TRIO Learning Community reported the highest level of across-the-board changes in teaching philosophy and strategies. This suggests that when faculty focus on course retention initiatives in one area or project, it has an influence on their teaching practice overall. The TRIO Learning Community has been and remains the most intensive and long-standing strategy employed at NMCC. It involves contact with the students three days a week for two semesters and requires a high level of cooperation with staff from the college's Student Support Services office. Perhaps the design, itself, of this community is what has encouraged significant change in the faculty members. One TRIO Learning Community instructor stated:

> TRIO work has made me aware of the myriad of problems students encounter and has given me the opportunity to work more closely with that group to make sure they succeed…TRIO makes opportunities to work one-on-one with students on their educational goals and their individual coursework challenges. This is a model we should follow for all of our students.

A similar sentiment is echoed by other learning community instructor, who shared:

> Through my work with the TRIO program, I have learned more about retention strategies and how to promote retention through course design and delivery. I have tried to redesign all my courses to incorporate results that have been proven to retain students…I have tried to get to know my students better as individuals, and enter into conversations with them about their overall college experience and goals, rather than just engage them in class-specific material.

Finally, half of the faculty participants who completed the survey report evaluating their retention strategies through the use of student feedback. The faculty member responsible for the SMART Start program tracked participating students through their first semester at NMCC and then sought feedback from them about the summer program. The TRIO faculty participants are similarly engaged in reviewing feedback and outcomes to improve student retention. There seems to be a connection between faculty participating in retention initiatives and then, as a natural extension of the initiative, seeking student feedback and evaluating their interventions with the goal of improved performance. While making changes in response to student feedback is not unique to faculty members who participate in retention activities, it further illustrates the importance these instructors place on students' experiences in their classrooms.

One faculty participant nicely captured the essence of faculty involvement with retention activities:

> We can be the first line of defense in losing students. Working to create cohort groups and allowing for "personal" interactions such as the instructor taking time to learn the names of the student's children, or where they work or their most effective learning style – as shared by the student.

Participating in retention initiatives can clearly be rewarding for faculty members and students, alike. The ripple effect within an institution could be powerful.

Faculty Perception of the Practitioner-as-Researcher Model

The formal assessment of retention initiatives also bore out benefits to faculty participants. At NMCC, three faculty members volunteered to collect data and assess the effectiveness of retention initiatives. Two of the faculty members engaged in the evaluation of the learning communities were actual instructors in the learning communities; one of the researchers was not an instructor in any of the learning communities. All three of these participants fit the practitioner-as-researcher role as described by Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman and Vallejo (2004).

Their rationale for volunteering to research the effectiveness of the retention strategies encompassed five goals:

1. Understand and expand knowledge base of what classroom measures are successful in retaining students
2. Hone personal research skills to better aid students in their research endeavors
3. Serve as examples of lifelong learners
4. Support the success of NMCC's Liberal Studies program by working toward increased retention of students
5. Engage in scholarship

When asked about their motivation to engage in retention research, these three faculty members expressed a desire to better understand how to engage and motivate students as a driving force. In addition, all three felt that their research initiatives made them more dynamic educators. One practitioner-as-researcher commented:

> We ask our students to engage in research activities, but at the community college level, we, as professionals, are often quite removed from the actual research process. By engaging in retention assessment research endeavors, I feel like I am experiencing some of the research conundrums my students encounter. I can actually assist them on a more practical level as a result of putting myself in a new role.

Another faculty researcher described how the new skills she picked up doing retention research allowed her to better advise students in utilizing new technology in their research and presentation of material.

When asked, every faculty member engaged in retention activities at NMCC attributed personal growth and more job satisfaction to their participation in retention endeavors. These responses suggest that if faculty members are invited to create, assess, and participate in retention strategies, it could shift their opinion about the integral nature of retention, resulting in them believing that student retention is central to their role.

Recommendations for Institutions to Increase Faculty Engagement in Retention Initiatives

If faculty members who participate in retention strategies display more concern for student retention and shape their practices around retention, wouldn't institutions want all faculty members to participate in retention activities? Based on the documented benefits to instructor job satisfaction, more faculty might be inclined to be involved in retention efforts if institutions promoted these attributes of retention to faculty. "Historically it has been the domain of the administrative function to study retention problems on campus and devise intervention strategies and initiatives to help bolster student persistence, but faculty have an important role to play in student learning and satisfaction and, therefore, in student retention" (Siegel, 2011, p.16). The more faculty members who are engaged, the more likely the institutional culture around retention is to change. Rather than it being the focus of one office or program on campus, it would be diffused among all campus members. According to Michael Siegel, it all comes down to perception. Institutions need to "reimagine the retention process…Retention is everyone's problem. It follows that it can be everyone's solution" (Siegel, 2011, p. 8).

The key to engaging faculty as partners in student retention is to make retention strategies appealing to them. The following section suggests ways to promote faculty participation in retention initiatives.

Educate Faculty on Why Retention Matters

In today's educational climate it is no longer a positive for an institution to boast about its "killer courses." All faculty need to realize that retention is everyone's job on campus. One way to begin this reeducation process is to

> multiply the loss of students times the number of years they are not retained times the fees they would have paid. The dollars add up fast. The sheer magnitude of the dollars involved will change perspectives on the need to address student retention issues. (McLaughlin, Brozovsky, & McLaughlin, 1998, p. 5)

Tying these lost dollars to specific things such as technology purchases or professional development funds could have a dramatic effect. For example, if an institution loses 5% of its incoming class after the first year, showcase to faculty what that means in terms of program and personnel cuts. Helping faculty become more aware of the financial consequences of attrition could help connect them to their institutions' retention priorities and make them more effective in the classroom.

Department meetings are another meaningful venue to start incorporating faculty in the retention discussion and to begin reshaping the mindset some faculty have that retention is not "their problem". Having faculty share strategies they use in the classroom to retain students can begin the process of empowering other faculty to take ownership when students fail to persist. Some faculty don't even recognize what types of retention efforts they could be doing.

It is important to let faculty know that retention efforts do not have to be large, sweeping programs, but could be small classroom initiatives like starting the semester off with easier assignments so more students experience early success and become invested. Planning workshop days where faculty from various departments can share their retention efforts can also inspire other faculty members to alter some of their teaching tactics. Surveying faculty about teaching practices that are successful in their classrooms and posting electronically the survey results would allow faculty members to see what their colleagues are doing at very little expense to the institution. Incorporating professional development opportunities around retention topics and promoting these events through conference attendance or webinars allows an institution to educate its faculty about what other institutions are doing.

Professional development is an important aspect of educating and partnering with faculty on retention initiatives. Institutions may prioritize professional development funds for retention activities or require on-campus professional development in the area of retention. A financial commitment on the part of institutions underscores the importance of retention, and some faculty may respond to the incentive of additional professional development. As an institution, NMCC supported faculty involved in retention initiatives by providing funds for professional development. Especially at the community college level, where faculty don't necessarily have an opportunity to build a sense of community with instructors at other institutions, administration needs to recognize that it is critical for faculty to be exposed to different views of retention practices.

Enlist Faculty as Partners in Student Retention and Acknowledge Their Expertise

With the three learning communities developed at NMCC, faculty were involved in every step of the process. For each one of these learning communities, changes were made for future iterations by the faculty directly involved in teaching the material. Rather than receiving mandates from administration on what the retention initiatives should look like, faculty are more apt to take ownership when they can personalize the retention strategy to complement their teaching style. Allowing faculty members to own retention initiatives will increase enthusiasm and commitment.

Institutions trying to engage faculty in the retention cause must provide a tangible benefit to the faculty members involved. Faculty participation in retention activities may increase when it is not something added to an already-burdened faculty. Especially at the community college level where faculty usually teach five courses per semester, in addition to advising and serving on committees, the thought of doing anything extra is almost prohibitive. In the faculty world, tangible benefits might include release time, a stipend, or a lighter teaching load; such incentives could increase faculty members' interest in participating in retention initiatives. With tightened budgets at institutions across the country, though, lighter teaching loads and/or more money are not always an option. Less expensive ways to acknowledge faculty involvement in retention could take the form of faculty or departmental recognition through the campus communications office. Attempts could be made to utilize alumni foundations to create mini-grants to fund faculty-led retention efforts (Siegel, 2011).

Encourage the Practitioner-as-Researcher Model for Faculty

Some studies indicate that there is a positive correlation between the research-teaching nexus (Prince, Felder, & Brent, 2007). Faculty are on the front lines of what is going on in the classroom; they are also "most directly able to actually do something to improve learning" (Cross, 1996, p. 404). These faculty researchers are also inherently creating a community through their research: "Classroom research provides a stimulus to forming a community around the mission that all colleges and universities share, and that is teaching" (Cross, 1996, p. 407). These sentiments were echoed by one NMCC member who said that "Since working more closely with my colleagues to incorporate and evaluate retention strategies, I feel a stronger sense of connection to my department." This, again, illustrates that researched classroom initiatives help faculty align their practices and values with the larger goals of their department or institution.

Faculty members who participate in retention activities should be encouraged to assess and report on their experiences. Faculty could be encouraged to share results with their department, division, campus, or system. Faculty may also choose to present findings at local or national conferences. The value of campus-level retention data to an institution cannot be underestimated, and should, therefore, be supported. At NMCC, faculty involved in retention initiatives have presented to their colleagues during professional development days. In one case, this resulted in another department adding a one-credit College Success style course geared specifically for students in their major.

Use Faculty to Model Retention Practices and Recruit Additional Faculty Participants

For colleges with faculty mentor programs already in place, there is an opportunity to select mentors with retention in mind. By choosing faculty members who are invested in retention as mentors, it ensures that the culture of retention will be reinforced and maintained. An opportunity also exists to provide existing faculty with a "retention mentor" – encourage faculty who are curious about best practices and retention initiatives to work with faculty who participate in retention strategies. For some faculty, this peer-to-peer mentoring will be the most powerful method of engagement. At NMCC, the full-time faculty is a small group; the Arts and Sciences Department only has eleven full-time members. Six of those members were engaged in the retention strategies described in this paper. These faculty members mentored one another through sharing experiences and, in addition, brought their knowledge to colleagues in other departments formally and informally.

Faculty may be more likely to participate in retention activities if they are approached by other faculty members. This may be more persuasive than being approached by administration or staff. If faculty sees that the initiative is valued by a peer and therefore worth the additional time and effort, they may be more likely to participate. Faculty recruiting faculty could result in stronger buy-in, creating the sense of a "ground up" approach rather than a "top down" approach to retention on campus.

Select faculty partners who are energetic, engaged, and already care about retention. By engaging a handful of energetic faculty members to participate in well-designed, meaningful retention initiatives, excitement about the practices can spread to other faculty members. Smaller scale activities also lend themselves to assessment and modification, increasing the chances that potential problems can be solved before rolling the initiative out to an entire faculty – one large scale mishap could result in negative faculty perceptions that are difficult, if not impossible, to repair.

Conclusion

Each institution is unique and there is no "one size fits all" approach to the retention problem. However, even the limited data presented in this paper demonstrates that it is possible to engage faculty members meaningfully as stakeholders in retention efforts, and that these efforts do have a positive effect on both faculty and students. To begin making positive change both in retention rates and in faculty perception of retention, this study showcases that small changes can reap valuable dividends. For faculty members at NMCC, the key was ownership of retention strategies. Instilling a grass-roots mentality allows for an organic practitioner-as-researcher model that encourages faculty members to be invested in the results. This ownership was reiterated in terms of job satisfaction as a recurring benefit for faculty participants and should not be underestimated as a possible driver of faculty participation. The enhanced relationships between faculty and students as well as among participating faculty and staff has the potential to be a catalyst for shifting an institution's culture around retention.

This small study invites the question: if all faculty members were invested in retention, could institutions meet their retention targets? To answer this question, understanding faculty's perception of retention initiatives will be key. At NMCC, faculty researchers plan to build off of this anecdotal case study of the Arts and Science department members and develop a college-wide, faculty survey that will be used to quantitatively assess relevant retention questions: What role do faculty believe retention plays as part of their job? Is it possible to shift faculty attitudes toward retention? What are the most effective means to do so? Questions such as these merit further consideration to understand how faculty fit into the retention puzzle.

This case study underscores the notion that faculty need to be a part of the retention equation. Faculty are in a unique position to enact positive change in the lives of their students. When faculty realize that what they do in their own classrooms has a ripple effect throughout the whole campus community in terms of the student experience, there is no limit to the positive repercussions that can result. However, if faculty refuse to assume part of the retention problem, there is no way an institution can achieve the retention benchmarks that will be necessary in the future to be a financially viable entity. Retention needs to become everyone's business.

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