Recruitment and retention: Whose job is it?

Jeff W. Bruns, Piedmont College, GA
Richard Nichols, Sterling College, KS
*Bruns, Ph.D. is a Senior Fellow in Management at the Walker School of Business at Piedmont
College. Nichols, DMA. is a professor and chair of the Department of Music at Sterling College.*

Abstract
In today's ever changing world of higher education the days of specialization of labor are giving
way to the need to get the greatest return on invested capital. The need to constantly recruit
students and the desire to retain them through graduation are becoming foundations for
everyone's job in higher education. Balancing the financial need for expanding student
enrollment with retaining those students through graduation is causing conflict with the
institution.

Introduction

Higher education has always been organizationally structured into different segments thereby
utilizing specialization of labor. Recruitment has usually been done by admissions and to a lesser
extent at smaller institutions the athletic department. Retention in the past has fallen on the
employees in student life and to lesser extent employees in secondary services, such as tutoring,
advising or counseling. The days of ever-increasing enrollment and ever-expanding budgets
have passed and today higher education in America has become big business.

Literature Review

With the increase in for-profit institutions and the paradigm shift into online and specialized
higher education the lines have become blurred as it relates to position descriptions for jobs on
college campuses. Higher education students today have been raised on a consumer driven
economic system where they view learning as a commodity (Celuch and Robinson, 2016; Wood,
2017).

The old system of offering a product (degree/major) and expecting admissions to find students
(customers) to fill the seats has given way to satisfying the wants of the students. Ali, Zhou,
Hussain, Nair and Ragavan (2016) state that students today want more than just four years of
standardized classes.   They want to be seen as a major stakeholder in the higher education

process and therefore want to have a say in how things operate. Students want to have a voice in things that have always been thought of as the domain of faculty and support staff. The definition of quality higher education has started to deviate away from faculty driven perceptions to student driven perceptions.

Ali, et al (2016) stated that students today define quality education based on five different factors that in the past would have probably not even been considered. Those factors revolve around creating long-term career opportunities for graduates, location, physical environment, cost and time. In reality, the only variable that is directly related to pure academics would be the desire for long-term career opportunities. The location, physical environment, cost and time are all things that can be quantified in relation to a dollar invested versus some aspect of utility. The geographic location of the institution, especially state sponsored, were designed around offering higher educational opportunities located throughout the state. However, that variable is starting to become even less concerning with expansion of online education and the ability to earn a degree without having to even leave your residence. The location of a campus environment can have a negative impact on student recruitment and retention if the geographic location is not desirable. This undesirability has a larger impact on small, private non-profit institutions that might be located in parts of states where the land is cheaper and the population is less dense. The physical environment is a factor that has little influence to the online student, but does have an impact on students who wish to leave home and live at the location of the campus. The physical environment of the campus (buildings, classrooms, athletic facilities, etc.) can have a direct impact on recruitment and retention. The physical appearance of the campus as well as the learning and living environment can influence student initial enrollment as well as ongoing enrollment as much as the academic side of the institution. Deferred maintenance can cause individuals to leave one school and enroll in another. Cost and time are usually considered at the same time. The quicker I can earn the degree the less it will cost me and the less debt that I will have to incur before I can start my career. This is partially a new measurement for recruitment and retention of higher education students.

Higher educational institutions have begun to utilize multiple avenues to entice students to enroll at their school. The Ivy League schools have national name recognition that allows them the ability to be very selective in relation to whom they admit. However, that is a very small sample size of only eight institutions of higher education, with Columbia University the largest with almost 23,000 students and Dartmouth College the smallest with 6,000. Land grant, state universities also have geographic name recognition and can usually be more selective in whom they enroll. However, other state schools and a vast majority of non-profit private institutions are required to utilize other recruitment techniques to keep new students coming to their institution year after year (Downes, 2017).

Public and private non-profit institutions have started to expand their recruitment strategies and rebrand themselves to be more attractive to students who may have never contemplated the four year route to begin with or who might not have considered higher education the right path at all. The current 18-22 year old, traditional student is different from the previous generation. The 'millennial' generation has been raised on social media and cell phones where everything is right at their fingertips and they are used to being in relationships that are intangible and somewhat superficial. They have expectations that relationships in the real world work the same as they do online. This expectation of reality does not always match up with the logistical demands of running an institution of higher education. However, there is a paradigm shift happening in

higher education where institutions are redesigning different aspects of the academic side of the school to increase the recruitment of these traditional students. Institutions of higher education are facing governing boards that want finite resources used to achieve maximum output while still maintaining a quality product. The desire of college administrators to keep the revenue stream forthcoming via enrollment numbers is constantly in conflict with the overall desire to produce a quality graduate who will then become a donating alumni (Stukalina, 2016; Thompson, 2017).

Stuart (2016) examined how the recruitment process has been changing over the past decade and what institutions are currently trying to expand new classes of incoming freshmen. The age-old concept of offering majors in fields that administrators and faculty wish to offer has been replaced with ongoing program assessment related to cost-benefit calculations. The idea is to be customer friendly as it relates to what degrees/majors are offered to incoming students and adding to or subtracting away those areas that no longer in demand. This shift occurred in the business world in the 1980s where manufacturers decided to ask customers what they wanted as opposed to building something and getting marketing to convenience them that they wanted the product (Scott, 2017).

Although it might sound like higher education is trying to become a 'seller' of a service and wanting to find 'customers' to purchase that service, that is far from the truth. The community college recruitment process might be adapted to 'open enrollment' status, however most four-year institutions are designed around some level of restriction. Institutions of higher education know that they need to bring in a constant stream of new students, but they also need to keep those students and help them become employed, gift giving alumni. Bejou and Bejou (2012) examined the 'back and forth' between filling classrooms and ensuring that those students have the necessary skills to complete college level work. Admission's job is to bring in as many paying students as possible year after year; however, they are usually not assessed in relation to making sure the student matriculates to graduation. If the student does not show the aptitude to complete college level work, via SAT/ACT, high school grade point average and/or class rank, that is not really admission's problem. If a student does not meet the minimum academic standards to persist from freshman to sophomore year or if the student does not like the environment on campus or does not form any connections to individuals or clubs on campus, a stand alone admission department has no level of culpability. However, when an enrollment management system is instituted that puts recruitment, retention, persistence and eventually graduation into single assessment outcome, admissions becomes an integral part of the entire process.

Student Recruitment

Student recruitment, like most components of higher education, has evolved over time. The days of trying to recruit only those academically prepared to go to college have changed into trying to increase headcount and/or 'full time equivalency' (FTE). The concept of 'open admission' or admitting a student on probation makes sense from a financial standpoint, considering economic issues are now a major, if not paramount concern for everyone in higher education administration. However, this can cause problems for those involved in retention issues. Carter and Yeo (2016) mention that many parts of the world only allow those that are prepared to be successful in college be allowed to attend. This allows finite resources to be better allocated to those students who will be successful and therefore, retention will not be a major concern. This

idea puts the concept of access vs. equity front and center. With unlimited or expanding budgets there is no need to decide between the two concepts. However, with public funding dollars shrinking for state institutions and student tuition costs reaching a breaking point at private institutions there is an urgency to make sure that outcome measurements are being achieved. Putting students in chairs is not difficult. The for-profit institutions have shown that with a good marketing plan and some creative advertising, you can fill up the real/virtual classroom with increased head count. However, as some recently closed for-profit institutions of higher education have learned, retaining those students to graduation is the problem. You can only rob Peter to pay Paul for so long before the entire organizational structure collapses (Wood, 2017).

Rafes, Malta and Siniscarco (2014) explained that when it comes to recruitment and the ultimate end result of graduation, it is essential that incoming students have clear career goals that have their undivided attention. When students are recruited and they are focused on what they wish to accomplish in their academic pursuits, as opposed to being unsure of why they are there and what they wish to do with their academic experience, they have a better experience and a higher retention rate. When the various parts of the institution are recruiting students that are not already focused on a specific area of study, it will hurt the institution's ability to improve retention and in the end graduation rates. Ivy League, land grants and other institutions that have excess demand for admittance do not have to focus as hard on retention and graduation rates because they are able to selectively decide which students to accept. Institutions with 90% or higher graduation rates usually do not face a negative concern related to retention issues. The students they admit already are focused on a particular academic area and are prepared to accomplish academic work before they enroll in their first class. For other institutions of higher education the concern is how do we connect admission with retention to increase graduation rates?

Student Retention

Kilburn, Kilburn and Cates (2014) concluded that the short-term advantages of putting financial resources and ongoing effort into promoting the institution and increasing recruitment will in the long-term have a negative consequence on the institution. The expansion of revenue that will follow the increase in enrollment will actually have long-term increased costs that exceed the marginal revenue. This is because there is a lack of proper retention and loyalty to the institution. The need and costs of continuously having to replace a large segment of your customer base will actually outweigh the amount of revenue brought in by those additional students. It is almost always cheaper to keep an existing customer than it is to find a new one. The authors concluded that in higher education on average it costs five times more to find a new student than it does to keep the students you already have enrolled. There is obviously going to be attrition through graduation. However, that is a positive outcome, because it shows prospective students that the institution is committed to their success and it increases the alumni base as well as the potential for them to donate to the institution. Furthermore, as students develop a loyalty to the institution by their upperclassman years, they become a positive force for future individuals with the same wants and desires. Positive peer word of mouth advertising does not have much cost to the institution and allows the school to bring in similar students who will have similar qualities to keep the institution moving in a positive direction (Carter and Yeo, 2016; Trede and McEwen, 2015).

As with most negative situations, it is human nature to find someone to blame. Bejou and Bejou (2012) explained that conventional wisdom is to blame the academic side of the organization. It must be the fault of faculty that students don't want to stay in their program. Faculty must be the reason that the customer does not get what he/she wants and therefore, the student will go somewhere else to achieve satisfaction. If a customer cannot get what he/she wants from one retail establishment, he/she will go to another. This theory treats higher education as if it is a commodity where the customer is always right. This thought process was one of the contributing factors to the downfall of some for-profit institutions of higher education. The concept of 'diploma mills', where you pay your money and you are given the degree you want, only leads to more negative consequences of decreasing validity in relation to a degree having any value to third parties. There is currently an ongoing debate as to whether students are customers and should higher education institutions even consider using a business driven organizational model related to such measurement as return on investment, return on assets, profit margin as well as borrowing funds in the bond markets (Jacobson, Delano, Krzykowski, Garafola, Nyman and Flynn, 2017; Vianden, 2015).

Bejou and Bejou (2012) stated that maybe the blame should be placed on the service side of the organization. The authors explained that students have already been indoctrinated into how the academic side of institution of higher education works. They have already spent twelve years of their lives in a grade driven environment and they realize that they are not paying money for a grade, but for the knowledge that goes along with increasing their abilities in the future. They expect to have to work hard to achieve a positive outcome in the classroom. Therefore, they go into the academic side of the experience with their 'eyes open' having a working knowledge of what is expected of them. The inability to retain students from freshman to sophomore year may be better correlated to the service side of the institution as opposed to the academic side. The first two years of a student's experience, usually falling under the title of 'enrollment management', has more to do with the service side of the organization than the academic side. The ability to help students form connections to parts of the campus as well as develop loyalty to the institution has little do with any specific academic area. Those two years of a student's experiences are focused on basic courses in a program as well as general education courses. During this time frame, there is not a lot of one-on-one connection formed between students and individual faculty members. In a business program, the first two years of most student's academic experiences are made up of taking large preliminary classes (i.e. Macroeconomics, Financial Accounting , Principles of Management, etc.) as well as standard general education classes (English Comp I, College Algebra, Speech, etc.). Therefore, those students do not get to know individual faculty members in their specific program until they reach their junior year where they are focused on taking multiple classes specifically designed towards their major degree. The literature on retention is mainly focused on increase freshman to sophomore year and therefore the academic side truly does not have much influence until the student reaches his/her junior year (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2017).

When it comes to retention Kilburn, Kilburn and Cates (2014) focused on trying to find ways to develop loyalty between students and the institution. Customer loyalty to an organization or brand loyalty to a specific product are everyday focal points in the for profit business world. Companies spend large sums of money to try and establish loyalty to their organization and products. However, institutions of higher education appear to be more inward focused when it comes to establishing long-term relationships. Academic departments are more concerned with

establishing employee loyalty between faculty and chairs/deans than concerning themselves with forging long-term foundations with freshman. Enrolling 100 freshman into a class taught by an adjunct or a graduate teaching assistant does little to help form the foundation of a long-term experience between the new students and the institution. Tenured faculty usually do not want to teach large numbers of students in freshman level classes. In addition, the academic administration does not want to cause any friction with the essential employees in the department. It is difficult to blame experienced faculty for not wanting to teach at the freshman level because the larger the class size the greater requirement of their time. Time spent on large class structures takes away from other components of the job that add greater individual value to the faculty member (i.e. publishing, presenting, consulting, etc.).

Discussion
Higher education is constantly being pulled in different directions. How do we offer a necessary service to society in the confines of a constant need to 'do more with less'? Any organization that is trying to operate in a free society must deal with the need to make their product/service relevant as well as ensuring the overall organization operates as efficiently and effectively as possible. In higher education, the days of ever expanding budgets has passed and the overall cost of attending has risen to a point that with some degrees/majors the return for the degree is less than the cost of attaining it. Institutions of higher education are facing a situation where they are focusing too much on equity and access to the point of mediocrity. It is hard to establish a long-term connection between students who are not prepared to complete college level work and the institution. Furthermore, there are external and political forces pushing to expand access for certain individuals who may not have the foundation to be successful in an academic environment.

The desire of the administration, especially development, to be able to fund raise from alumni means that there is a constant and ongoing need to keep students coming in the door and graduating. Each student who enters the institution and does not graduate is one less potential donor for the school. There is a general consensus that it is three to five times more expensive to find a new customer (student) than it is to keep your existing customer base. In a perfect world, each incoming freshman would eventually leave the institution but that would be four years later with a degree in hand. Therefore, the alumni base would constantly be expanding at a measurable rate each year and it would allow for development to be able to have a constant base from which to solicit funds. The larger problem is institutions have three different groups all measuring something different under the guise of the same outcome. Admissions is measured in relation to meeting an established headcount or FTE each year/semester and once they achieve that outcome their evaluation stops. In addition, they need to not only bring in that specific number of new freshman but they also need to replace those students who do not return for their sophomore year. Retention departments and/or academic affairs offices put forth considerable effort trying to figure out how to increase freshman to sophomore retention therefore allowing for less money to be budgeted to admissions for the next year.   Development needs to keep increasing the amount of donated money that comes into the institution to meet long-term goals and in the case of some institutions help to meet budgeting shortfalls. Development needs to have as many students as possible graduating so their fund raising rosters are expanding each semester. All three groups are working in their own little fiefdoms in almost isolation from the other departments.

Student satisfaction can be a double edge sword for every department in the institution. The desire for students to be happy and form a loyal bond to the institution is essential but at what cost to the institution. The desire of students to get 'a passing grade' and graduate is constantly being weighed against the expected level of rigor from faculty who want to establish some validity in relation to their classes/programs. Student life wants the students to have multiple activities that they enjoy, but they are also constrained by the costs of providing those services. The administration wants to put forth an image of quality and value based on reputation, campus appearance, cost, career placement and other macro factors but are constrained by external factors that are sometimes completely out of their control.

Conclusion

Simply put, there are no easy answers to the question of 'whose job is it'? An institution of higher education is not a single unit or department working towards a singular goal. There are multiple areas on a college campus and each one has its own goals and measurement outcomes. In the for profit corporate world, profitability is the goal for all members of the organization. The need to turn a profit is directly correlated to their ability to keep their job. Higher education does not have that collective focus and therefore it makes it harder to get all parts of the organization working the same direction towards the same end. The concern of, 'who is going to pay for it?' is a daily concern. Each department on campus has its own budget and the amount of resources is finite. Therefore admissions budget is spent on increases the amount of students who matriculate into the institution. They do not have the monetary resources to make sure that these students are prepared to be successful. Academic department budgets are structured to provide academic coursework demands and facilitate faculty development needs therefore increasing the institutions reputation. With each area focused on their own wants and needs there is trouble getting a collective measurement outcome that can be replicated from one institution to another.

References

Ali, F., Zhou, Y., Hussain, K., Nair, P. and Ragavan, N. (2016). Does higher education service quality effect student satisfaction, image and loyalty? *Quality Assurance in Education,* 24(1), 70-94.

Bejou, D. and Bejou, A. (2012). Shared governance and punctuated equilibrium in higher education: The case for student recruitment, retention and graduation. *Journal of Relationship Marketing,* 11, 248-258.

Carter, S. and Yeo, A. (2016). Students-as-customers' satisfaction, predictive retention with marketing implications. *International Journal of Educational Management,* 30(5), 635-652.

Celuch, K. and Robinson, N. (2016). How the customer feedback process contributes to perceived customer orientation and affective commitment in the higher educational

service context. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior,* 29, 53-76.

Cotton, D., Nash, T. and Kneale, P. (2017). Supporting the retention of non-traditional students in higher education using a resilience framework. *European Educational Research Journal*, 16(1), 62-79.

Downes, M. (2017). University scandal, reputation and governance. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 13(1), 1-20.

Jacobson, T., Delano, J., Krzykowski, L., Garafola, L., Nyman, M. and Flynn, H. (2017). Transfer student analysis and retention: A collaborative endeavor. *Reference Services Review*, 35(3), 421-439.

Kilburn, A., Kilburn, B. and Cates, T. (2014). Drivers of student retention: System availability, privacy, value and loyalty in online higher education. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal,* 18(4), 1-14.

Rafes, R., Malta, S. and Siniscarco, M. (2014). Career mapping: An innovation in college recruitment and retention. *College & University,* 9(1), 47-52.

Scott, R. (2017). Thinking about students: A personal perspective. *On The Horizon*, 25(3), 215-223.

Stuart, R. (2016). Steadying the fall. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education,* 33(18), 12-13.

Stukalina, Y. (2016). Modelling student satisfaction and motivation in the integrated educational environment. *International Journal of Educational Management.* 30(6), 1072-1087.

Thompson, D. (2017). This is the way the college 'bubble' ends. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/07/college-bubble-ends/534915/

Trede, F. and McEwen, C. (2015). Early workplace learning experiences: What are the pedagogical possibilities beyond retention and employability? *Higher Education,* 69, 19-32.

Vianden, J. (2015). What matters in college to students: Critical incidents in the undergraduate experience. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice,* 52(3), 287-299.

Wood, P. (2017). How to stop complaining and start fixing American's higher education crisis. *The Federalist.* Retrieved from http://thefederalist.com/2017/05/15/stop-complaining-start-fixing-americas-higher-education-crisis/