Student Perspectives on Barriers to Timely Graduation

Dr. Juhee Kim

Dept. of Leadership & Counseling, University of Idaho

875 Perimeter Drive MS 3087, United States

Tel: 1-859-544-7660   E-mail: juheekim@uidaho.edu

Abstract

This study examines the barriers preventing students from graduating college in four years and proposes strategies for enhancing student academic completion and retention in higher education. To explore contemporary perspectives, Appreciative Inquiry was employed. The findings revealed the personal and institutional level of challenges as well as the need for a support system to ensure timely graduation. Addressing students' biggest barriers to timely graduation require campus-wide engagement and deep collaboration across institutional functions. Specifically, higher education institutions need to provide adequate academic, social, and cultural assistance to embrace international, minority, low-income, and first-generation college students.

Keywords: College students, Barriers, Student Attitudes, Time to degree, Institutional characteristics, Higher education

1. Statement of the Problem

Nearly half of all students who begin college do not graduate within six years, and the consequences of taking on debt but never receiving a meaningful degree can be severe in the US. Students who borrow for college but never graduate are three times more likely to default on loans (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Also, 80 percent of students have to borrow too much to pay for college (Moore & Tan 2018). International, minority, low-income, and first-generation college students are more likely to face a series of challenges to graduating on time at universities and colleges (Talley, 2020; Wu et al., 2015). This study explores the barriers preventing students from graduating college in four years by studying a focus group (FG) and providing key recommendations for action.

2. Literature Review

There is a need to identify resources, strategies, and provide support services for underprepared students so they can achieve and persist in a college environment (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Katrevich & Arugyete, 2017). Many first-generation African American college students come from low-income households (Talley, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), only 9% of first-generation African American college students represent the lowest quartile of graduates with a bachelor's degree at age 24. Also, international undergraduates have been reported to experience various challenges that impact their success at American universities (Gautam et al., 2016; Perry, 2016; Fass-Homnes, 2016; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009; Wu et al., 2015).

This study utilized Tinto's "Model of Institutional Departure". Tinto (1975) developed a theory that elucidated the longitudinal process of social interactions that influenced persistence or dropout behavior on college campuses. He argued that a lack of integration into the academic and social systems would lead to a low commitment to that educational system and could lead to withdrawal (Moore, 2013; Tinto, 1975; Turner, 2018). In addition, the social identity theory of Tajfel (1981) was applied to consider how group membership affects individual identity. It highlights that specific cross-cultural diversity's many implications on group membership, perceptions, and interactions (Kim, 2021).

For students' personal level of graduation barriers, financial difficulties are undoubtedly the most common and persistent problems that both domestic and international students face (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Evans & Noriega, 2011; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Womujuni, 2007). Pitre and Pitre (2009) wrote that financial barriers are a deterrent to higher education, and students who develop relationships with higher-education institutions may be more likely to persist. These difficulties include, but are not limited to, finances, difficulties adjusting to the acculturative stress, changes in family circumstances or expectations, homesickness and/or loneliness, poor time management, and lack of study skills (Jackson et al., 2013; Sakurako 2000; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yue et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, there are many difficulties at the institutional level such as difficulties adjusting to the academic culture, complications in communication with faculty and peers, acculturative stress, American teaching methods, campus climate, discrimination, interpersonal interactions, and poor study practices (Roy, 2013; Russell et al., 2010; Sherry et al., 2010; Yildirim, 2014). Although many of these challenges could also be experienced by domestic undergraduates, some of them uniquely affect international students.

3. Methodology

This study used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) theoretical research perspective and methodology. The theory of positive organizational change suggests that AI fosters change in three ways: by posing the topic of inquiry; by creating a broadening and building effect; and by establishing strengths (relationships, resources, and ideas) that 'eclipse' the organization's problems (Cockell & Schiller, 2020; Waters & White, 2015). Based on the literature reviews, ten open-ended questions have been created that focus on the main barriers to timely

graduation at personal and institutional levels. These questions also focus on their needs for better support and reducing those barriers.

The questions were reviewed by five faculty and staff of the university who could provide feedback on their clarity and validity. The researcher modified the questions selected and then met with an FG consisting of twelve diverse college students to discuss ten questions. After identifying common themes, the themes were shared with an FG and modified for validity according to their input.

4. Findings

4.1 Personal Level Barriers

Both the domestic and international students' reasons for wanting to graduate on time are related mainly to financial concerns. Students indicated that they were concerned about running out of financial aid before graduating. In the case of international students, there are more limitations and restrictions on eligibility for financial aid and access to work experience.

Personal issues require substantial time, which impedes progress. Students also struggle with studying skills and time management. They recognize they are using less time preparing for class, with some indicating that barriers to making progress include their own insufficient time management and studying skills. International students, in particular, deal with more academic challenges, social isolation, and cultural adjustment.

4.2 Institutional Level Barriers

Limited course availability topped the list of obstacles for both domestic and international students. Students expressed frustration about limited course availability that consequently led them to take courses they did not need in order to maintain full-time enrollment status and financial aid eligibility. For international students, it is mandatory compliance with federal immigration regulations to maintain full-time enrollment each semester (US. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2020).

Difficulties selecting an appropriate major or having changed a major were perceived as a significant challenge to timely graduation. Moreover, the FG described several problems with both their access to and the quality of advising services. Therefore, it is essential to provide advice tailored to students' needs. Connecting with faculty and peers who share their interests also helps to increase their engagement with and enthusiasm for their studies.

Institutions of Higher Education should recognize that students want more structure and alignment. Therefore, they need to offer more class selections in an appropriate sequence at varying times. It will allow students to make progress and graduate in a timely manner. Institutions also need to focus on aligning courses and providing clear paths. It is important to figure out student issues on personal and institutional levels through an active support system (Figure 1.)
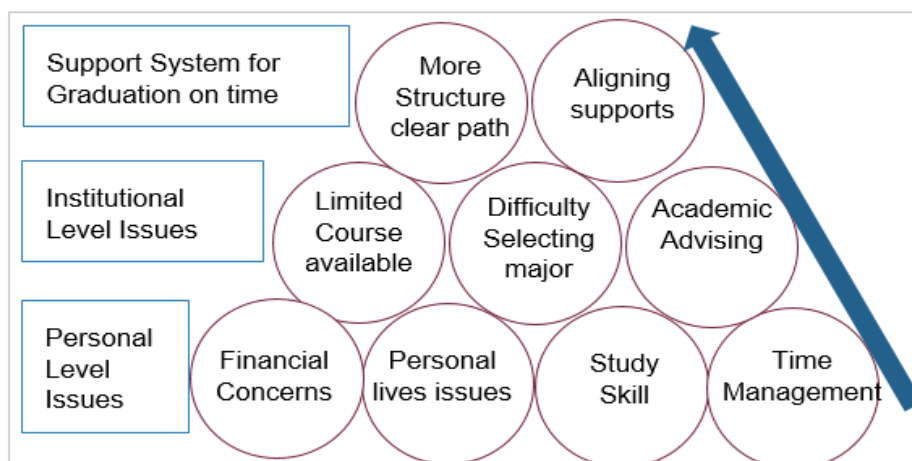
Figure 1. The Direction of Support System for Student Graduation on Time

5. Conclusion

School involvement itself can motivate some students not to drop out and graduate on time. The information should be available to promote school involvement that demonstrates students learning, achieving accomplishments, and having a good time. This study suggests that higher-education leaders directly impact the success of college students. Student and faculty member relationships improve the odds of college students' persistence (Longwell Grice et al., 2016). Acquiring resources and financial aid and establishing an effective communication relationship with educational leaders are integral to students' college success. Strengthening academic advising to better tailor to students' individual needs might require restructuring advising services to be more closely tied to students' prospective majors.

This study will shed light on students' main graduation barriers, comparing those of domestic and international students to better serve their individual needs in higher education. Tinto (1975) believed social integration leads to persistence, and implementing programs specifically tailored to students' social needs can lead to higher retention rates, especially for low-income and international students. Institutions in higher education need to provide adequate support not only academically but also socially and culturally, to embrace and encourage international, minority, and first-generation college students.

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