

Relational Retention: Connections That keep Students on Campus

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Christine N. Michael, Ph.D.
Virginia M. "Missy" Wilkins, Ph.D.

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Current College Success

- In 1970, the United States had the world's highest rate of college graduation. Today, we rank #15 in college completion.
(Rouse, 2012)
- Within 3 years of entering an institution of higher education, more than 1/3 of all students will leave empty handed.
- Only 34% of students starting at a 4-year institution will complete their bachelors in 4 years.

(Golrick-Rab & Roska, 2008)

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Current College Success

- Access for low-income, first generation students has increased, but successful completion of a college degree, especially a bachelor's degree, has not.
(Pell Institute, 2008)
- Approximately 55% of first time/full time students complete bachelor's degree in six years
 - 59% Caucasian
 - 41% African American and Hispanic
 - 26% for those with family incomes <\$25,000
 - If low income and first generation, 11% completion

(National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina)

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What Does Research Tell Us About Retention When Considering The Social And Psychological Domains?

- The ACT (2004) study of college retention found that social support and social involvement on campus were as important in college retention as high school grade point average and more important than ACT assessment scores.
- Despite poor academic preparation and early performance, many students persist because of their successful social integration and feelings of fit with their institution.
- Social integration is especially important for students who are first-generation college attendees, have limited English proficiency, or are from a cultural or minority background.

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What Does Research Tell Us About Retention When Considering The Social And Psychological Domains?

Tinto (1995, 1997) found that failure to ‘negotiate the rites of Passage’ —separating from family, high school, local community, and forming a new identity, friends and a community with similar values—was key in students’ dropping out of college.

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What Does Research Tell Us About Retention When Considering The Social And Psychological Domains?

Bean & Eaton (2000) found that students who were ‘Socially integrated’ rather than ‘Socially avoidant’ experienced feelings of integration that fed back into students’ positive psychological assessments of their own self efficacy, ability to handle stressors, and internal locus of control.

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What Does Research Tell Us About Retention When Considering The Social And Psychological Domains?

Martinez et al. (2009) found that “being fully integrated into campus life leads to higher levels of academic achievement, including higher GPA’s.” However, first-generation students are much less likely to be involved than are their non-first-generation counterparts, even though they derived greater outcome benefits from extracurricular involvement and peer interaction.

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What Does Research Tell Us About Retention When Considering The Social And Psychological Domains?

Davis (2010) reports that first-generation college students need personal relationships with faculty and staff: “The symbolic impact of being able to say ‘I know Professor Smith,’ cannot be underestimated.”

He also mentions the need for mentors from the same backgrounds and profiles as minority, first-generation and low-income students.

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What Does Research Tell Us About Retention When Considering The Social And Psychological Domains?

The ACT study (2004) finds that “One of the primary factors affecting college retention is the quality of interaction a student has with a concerned person on campus.”

Courses and programs that build mentoring and support groups into their design help improve levels of student involvement, motivation, and academic self-confidence, and, in turn, increase levels of institutional commitment and engagement.

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What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Relational Retention?’

Relational retention is the intentional use of positive personal relationships as resources to increase the likelihood of persistence to graduation.

(Michael & Wilkins, 2010)

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Relational Resiliency

Relational Resiliency is the buffering effect that positive relationships have on individuals as they navigate change and transitions. (Michael & Wilkins, 2011)

Findings from original research (Michael & Wilkins, 2010): Qualitative interviews with successful graduates who were first-generation, low-income students. (examples of verbatim quotes from two research participants can be found later in this document)

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Findings

- 1. Retention is relational more than any other factor, including academic preparation.**
- 2. There are two ways in which relationships affect academic success: as “encouragers” or “inhibitors.”**
- 3. Underserved students identified multiple relationships as being integral to their success:**

Professors
Academic advisors
Resident assistants, dorm directors, dorm-based living/learning communities
Coaches, support staff, heads of clubs or service activities
Peers, students in classes, cohort-based programs
Teachers and community members from “back home”
Friends from community of origin
Family members/guardians

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Findings

4. The last four categories can just as easily be “inhibitors” as “encouragers.”

5. Students in this demographic:

Benefit from conducting an inventory of the relational resources they possess as they transition to the college campus.

Often need assistance in establishing new positive relationships, especially with faculty, advisors, and other “authority figures.”

May benefit from learning strategies to manage current relationships that are “inhibitors.”

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“Stephanie”

Challenges of first year: “I was homesick so much,”
“nursing was so stressful.”

“I missed the way my old teachers were, how they knew about me, knew who I was.”

Wanted to leave 1st semester and her mother encouraged her, “just to come home and go to community college.”

How did mentors keep her in college?

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“Stephanie”

FIRST-SEMESTER ENGLISH PROFESSOR— (faculty)

“She had been a principal in a high school in a small town, and she was just what I was looking for. I got really close to her. She would actually talk with us one-to-one and listened to us express our feelings. Even though the course was ‘Research and Rhetoric,’ she let us use the writing as a way to work through our issues.”

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“Stephanie”

RESIDENT DIRECTOR AND RESIDENT ASSISTANTS—
(staff)

“My RA really noticed that after the first few weeks, when I would go around knocking on everyone’s door and introducing myself, I kept my door shut and didn’t really socialize. I thought that was how I had to study because I was struggling with the work so much in the beginning. She suggested that I leave the door open, study in an environment where other people were around, and I learned that I didn’t have to be closed in and alone so much.”

He convinced me that I would be here only so much time, that this was for my future and my career, and that home would always be there---maybe not the same, but there.”

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“Stephanie”

LEARNING COMMUNITY (peer) —

“Nursing is very competitive and very hard, so it’s hard to have a social life. My peers are not my best friends, but they’re like my co-workers or professional colleagues. We do study groups together and every Thursday, we will have dinner together after ten hours of clinicals. It doesn’t take the place of family but it’s the support like a professional network.”

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“Stephanie”

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS BACK HOME
(community of origin) —

“They were there if I needed them to be for me. There were several teachers that I kept in touch with, and they helped me keep my head above water. So did my friends on Facebook. They were like ‘you can’t waste everything that you’ve done to get there.’”

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“Juan”

Challenges of the first year: “I was not academically prepared,”
“No one in my home culture really could help me,”
“Only about 5% students of color on my campus.”

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“Juan”

EOP— “The EOP program was huge! We did a four-week, pre-fresh institute, all of us low-income students, and it brought us together so closely. Those 50 connections made during the summer helped the transition because I had other students I was already bonded with.”

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“Juan”

LEARNING COMMUNITY— “Having the same 20 students in the same set of classes and same structure really helped me develop. Because of the nature of the courses, the course material was a lot more personal and the learning a lot more intimate. It really made me step it up academically.”

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“Juan”

PROFESSORS— “The key to the learning community was the core professor, who really took me in and helped me develop. This was my first out of classroom relationship. I went to office hours, and when he saw that I had initiative, he suggested academic and other events. I even eventually ended up babysitting his kids.”

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“Juan”

MENTORS— “When I arrived on campus, I really needed mentors. This was a whole new territory and I was wide open to getting as much mentoring as I could. Three professors identified resources for me, which eventually led me into student government and study abroad. I got invited to go to conferences with them, they helped me get scholarships to go abroad, and I chose my major of anthropology because of one of them, who was a man of color and someone I wanted to be.”

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“Juan”

MOTHER AND FATHER— “I felt that they really couldn’t relate. They didn’t get much education themselves so they didn’t know how to give advice. They were six hours away, and while conversations were supportive, their role really was just to make sure that my immediate needs were met. I distanced myself from them to focus; Every family has its own drama, but I had to put that all on the backburner. That’s why my mentors and their families were so important.”

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“Juan”

LEARNING COMMUNITY—Having the same 20 students in the same set of classes and same structure really

PEERS— “Those relationships were put on the backburner, especially with peers that didn’t get out. Of my 6 closest friends, I was the only one that made it out.

Even though I called and texted, I wasn’t always able to connect. It was positive in the sense that I was an example to them and sometimes got them motivated, but it was negative in that I wasn’t able to be there for them on a daily basis. I had moved on to something different.”

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“Juan”

CAMPUS CULTURE— “There was a lot of emphasis on relationships, especially in the learning communities. That’s key for first generation , to help Them develop a professional style of conversation, but also to be able to maintain their values and traditions from where they came from. Those relationships helped me bridge the gap between higher education and lack of education. The bridge allowed me to maintain my pride, but also forge a new identity, not forgetting the place I came from. It made me appreciate my own success so that I didn’t feel guilty about getting out.”

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How Can We Increase Students’ Resiliency On Campus?

We want to assist students in conducting an inventory of the relational resources they possess as they transition to the college campus.

Kinds of Relationships
Strength of Relationships
Nature of Relationships

We want to help them *recognize how to use these relationships effectively*, including augmenting their resources if necessary.

We want to assist college faculty and staff in recognizing the vital roles that they play in relational retention and encourage them to engage in campus discussions about relationship building.

We want to build capacity among student leaders and mentors so that they can play critical roles in relational retention.

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In order to increase resiliency of “fragile” students, we need more intentional approach and tools to help them.

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Relational Resources Inventory (RRI) ©

	COLLEGE COMMUNITY	SUPPORTS SUCCESS	BLOCKS SUCCESS
Professor	_____	▲	▲
Advisor	_____	▲	▲
Coach	_____	▲	▲
Roommate	_____	▲	▲
RA	_____	▲	▲
Friend	_____	▲	▲
Other	_____	▲	▲
Other	_____	▲	▲
HOME COMMUNITY			
Family	_____	▲	▲
Friend	_____	▲	▲
Former teacher	_____	▲	▲
Mentor	_____	▲	▲
Other	_____	▲	▲
Other	_____	▲	▲

Are there other connections you would like to make?

Goals

Directions: Check each statement with YES, NO, or UNDETERMINED to accurately describe you.

	YES	NO	UNDETERMINED
SOCIAL			
I get along with my roommates.			
I feel close to those with whom I share "secret" and "inner" jokes.			
I have friends at college I can talk to.			
I have at least one adult on campus who can serve as my mentor.			
Other social areas I want to improve:			
ACADEMIC			
My assignments reduce my best efforts.			
I complete my assignments on time.			
Other academic areas I want to improve:			
HEALTH			
I get 7-8 hours of sleep at night.			
I eat nutritious meals most of the time.			
I get 30 minutes of exercise at least three a week.			
Other health related areas I want to improve:			

From heading of your response sheets, what are you doing well? What areas need your attention?

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Mentoring Critical Incident Writing Based on Brookfield (1987)

Think of a time when you were faced with and there was someone who helped to guide you through the challenge successfully. How did this person help you? What qualities did he or she possess that were useful to you? Include as many details about the experience as you can.

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Mentoring Critical Incident Writing Based on Brookfield (1987)

Are there any qualities of your former mentor that you think would help you now at college? Where might you find such a mentor?

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