The Rules of Three in Student Support

BY MIKE NORRIS

Students attending all types of colleges and universities typically fall into one of three categories: self-sufficient, not afraid to ask for help, and all of the others. Self-sufficient students and those unwilling to seek help seem to be properly supported by existing programs. Reaching all of the other students is a continuing challenge for institutions. These students often lack confidence, are afraid to reach out, or feel stigmatized if they ask for help.

Research demonstrates that an inability to cope with college stressors, such as relationship issues, financial challenges, and depression, can negatively impact a student's academic performance, satisfaction with an institution, and persistence. Recent retention statistics show:

➤ Only 59 percent of students attain their degree in six years.
➤ At two-year institutions, only 31 percent of students attain their degree or certification.

➤ For at-risk populations, retention is even more problematic. Low-income, first-generation college students are nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after their first year than other students.
➤ Similarly, while black and Latino students make up 25 percent of the total postsecondary student population, they represent only 17 percent of degree recipients.

Determining how to help these students requires a three-pronged approach of creativity, persistence, and constant re-evaluation of programs. This brings us to another rule of three, which is to foster communication, connection, and community. It is key to provide programs that enhance communication among students, faculty, and administrators that is confidential, current, accurate, and easy to use. Providing an easy channel to connect with qualified mentors and resources is important. Open communication and connection help provide a sense of community or feeling of belonging. If students feel comfortable, they are more likely to access programs, and

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a great way to reach them is through the tools and technologies they use in their everyday lives, including smartphones, personal computers, and laptops.

Reports reveal that students are quick to search online for the answers to daily living needs, and their solutions often come from unvalidated sources. CU Thrive, an online, on-demand college life program, gives students a safe, designated space to seek out and/or offer support by accessing resources created and vetted by academic and mental health professionals.

NASPA, in collaboration with the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, has developed CU Thrive to address the everyday needs of students and to complement existing higher education initiatives. CU Thrive offers an interactive, Web-based foundation for college students to explore, understand, and develop a unique health and wellness identity. The program takes a proactive approach to addressing daily campus issues by directly supporting students and increasing communication, connection, and community throughout the campus environment. The goal of CU Thrive is to foster student resilience, persistence, and improved retention.

Many of the theories used in studies of college student retention have been developed by Vincent Tinto in the theoretical model of persistence. According to Tinto, persistence occurs when a student successfully integrates into the institution academically and socially. Integration, in turn, is influenced by pre-college characteristics and goals, interactions with peers and faculty, and out-of-classroom factors. Accordingly, institutions share responsibility in the successful cultural and social integration of students into college.

According to researcher Gail Wagnild, resilient individuals may experience the same stressful experiences as non-resilient people. However, they have protective mechanisms in place to deal with these difficulties and return to a state of balance. When these protective factors are present at the time of an adverse event, they help to buffer the effects of the negative experience and provide a more positive outcome.

Higher education institutions cannot always control the risk factors that impact individual students, but can offer programs that reinforce these protective factors and create interventions or educational environments that foster these strengths. Stay focused on the rules of three to positively affect students, higher education institutions, and society.

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