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The SACRAO Journal is printed by S. Clarke Marketing, Inc., Northport, Alabama.

Previous volumes of the SACRAO Journal are published online at http://sacrao.org/?p=newsjournal

2015 VOLUME TWENTY-EIGHT

Contents

Staff Perceptions of Work-Environment Factors Affecting Morale in Southeastern Registrar’s Offices ........................................................5 Rheanna Plemons

Transitioning Challenges for International Student-Athletes ......................13 Rodney L. Parks, Benjamin M. Perron, and Phylicia Pearl W. Mpasi

Outstanding Student Retention and Graduation: The Peer Advisors and Mentors Program at the University of Richmond .................21 Hope N. Walton and Roger Mancastroppa

Perspectives on Working with Nontraditional Students ..........................29 Linda Dammer and Edward Trombley

The Story of “The Box”: Protecting High Profile Student Files .................33 Brenda L. Martinez
Information for Authors

The Editorial Board welcomes manuscripts for publication in SACRAO’s academic, refereed publication, *The SACRAO Journal*. Members of SACRAO are encouraged to submit articles which pertain to their professional experiences regarding issues and innovative practices in the profession.

Preparing Manuscripts

Manuscripts should be submitted in accordance with the stylistic rules and guidelines delineated in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed., 2010). For information, visit http://www.apastyle.org. Manuscript pages should be numbered consecutively. All manuscripts are accepted for publication with the understanding that *The SACRAO Journal* Editorial Board reserves the right to edit for clarity, syntax, and style. The need either to shorten or request the author to lengthen articles is at the discretion of the Editorial Board.

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Manuscript Submission

Manuscripts submitted for publication must be original material which has not been simultaneously submitted for publication elsewhere. Length of the manuscripts, including references and tables, should range from about 8 to 20 typed, double-spaced, 8½ x11-inch pages. Abstracts are limited to 125 words. Brief reports of research are discouraged. Authors should retain a copy of the manuscript to guard against loss.

Please email or send your manuscript to: Matthew P. McCrickard, Editor, *The SACRAO Journal*, at matthew.mccrickard@wallaceestate.edu or Wallace State Community College, P.O. Box 2000, Hanceville, Alabama 35077.

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**Editor’s Reflections**

The Southern Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers has, for nearly seven decades, promoted the advancement of higher education and open sharing of ideas and best practices among its membership through annual meetings and various publications including *The SACRAO Journal*. It is customary for the editor of this publication to offer a few opening comments and reflections to preview any nascent themes for the year as well as offer brief remarks to thank those who have been instrumental to the process. This year is no exception, as my term as your Editor reaches its prescribed course.

Scholars and practitioners alike have lauded the importance of reflection as an integral part of effective leadership, personal growth, and understanding organizational dynamics. For example, Argyris (1991) describes reflection in terms of feedback loops within a system and continues to be often cited within the fields of business and management. Mezirow (2000), throughout discussions of his transformative learning theory, suggests critical reflection is an integral aspect of understanding one’s self within broader social constructs. Using his own reflections as an example of effective praxis, Brookfield (2013) discusses the importance of understanding the ways our perceptions of the world shape our engagement with the students whom we serve. Informed by the amalgam of these scholars’ theoretical perspectives, I believe that reflection is essential for holistic connection of the seemingly disparate aspects of administration, teaching, and service within my work in higher education. I hope all members of our association will make reflection a routine practice, actively thinking about what students and colleagues have taught us, and how our contributions to our institution’s successes have influenced us as members of the various learning communities of which we are members.

As a point of personal privilege, I would like to express my deepest thanks to each of our colleagues who comprised the 2014-2015 *The SACRAO Journal* Editorial Board. Many thanks to Bob Askins, Bobbie Brown, John Fletcher, Jennifer Hardy, Venesa Heidick, Judith McKeon, and Vice President for Professional Development Barbara Rowe for shepherding authors through the editorial processes and offering me their time, talents, and wise counsel throughout my term as Editor. Through these board members’ vision and leadership, *The SACRAO Journal* remains timely and relevant within higher education conversations; making certain that our region’s authors’ research and perspectives are shared throughout the southeastern United States and Puerto Rico, as well as introduced beyond our association.

This 2015 volume continues the longstanding traditions of *The SACRAO Journal*, and authors are once again providing readers from all sectors of higher education with unique perspectives and contextual underpinnings, from which to consider issues that are likely being discussed on every college or university campus. Rheanna Plenmons offers insights into her research on the ways in which staff morale and work environments influence the cohesion and effectiveness of Registrar’s staff on college and university campuses. Rodney Parks, Benjamin M. Perron, and Phylicia Pearl W. Mpasi present their findings from a mixed methodology study which explores barriers to international student-athlete success, describes implications for campus communities, and offers various recommendations for serving this growing student constituency. Hope Walton and Roger Mancastroppa detail the history and successes of a longstanding peer advisor and mentor program at the University of Richmond which has bolstered the retention and graduation of student participants. Linda Dammer and Edward Trombley share their perspectives and what they have learned from serving with nontraditional learners at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

*Brenda Martínez* contributes perspectives and suggestions on how to go about effectively and tactfully serving students who may be considered to be famous or high profile. I congratulate each of these authors for developing their work for publication and for contributing these articles for the betterment of our association.

I offer my sincere thanks to SACRAO Presidents Mary Kincannon (2012-2013), Dorinda Harmon (2013-2014), and Amy Barber (2014-2015) for offering me the opportunity to serve on and chair the journal committee for the past several years, as well as to contribute to the association through a term as Editor of your *SACRAO Journal*. Additionally, I thank my many colleagues who have written articles, or encouraged others to do so, to bring this journal to fruition each year. I hope each SACRAO member will consider writing an article for one of the upcoming volumes of *The SACRAO Journal*. Please contact me if I may assist you in developing something for the board’s consideration, or discuss ideas or potential topics for exploration. I would be happy to help or assist you with contacting a 2015-2016 editorial board member.

**References**


THE MARGARET RUTHVEN PERRY
DISTINGUISHED SACRAO JOURNALISM AWARD

This award is presented annually to the author whose article promotes and advances knowledge, techniques, and standards of competence in the profession. The award was initially established by Margaret Ruthven Perry, who served as the first editor of The SACRAO Journal. It was named in her honor following the completion of her service as editor. Listed below are the recipients of the award.

1989 - Diane Freytag
The Evolution and Maintenance of an Enrollment Management Program

1990 - T. Luther Gunter
Image Technology in the Information Age: Is Microfilm Really Dead?

1992 - Bruce W. Cunningham
Students Versus Registrars: Opponents or Partners in the Educational Process

1994 - David H. Stones
On the Strategic Nature of SPEEDE/ExPRESS: Scalability, and Applicability of EDI in the Workplace

1996 - James Lynch
African-American Undergraduate Recruitment Strategies

1997 - Michael E. Malone
SACRAO’s “50th”: A Tint of Gold

1998 - Cynthia J. Ferrier
Electronic Grades: From Professor to Student Information System

1999 - Edward L. McGlone
Primer on Outcomes Assessment for Academic Administrators

2000 - Rick Skeel
How to Find Funding for EDI: Oklahoma’s State-wide Grant Approach

2001 - Angela J. Evans
Home School Education: Its Impact on a State University

2002 - Paul Taylor
The Future of Higher Education in the 21st Century

2003 - Bradley W. Johnson and Sheldon L. Stick
Application of Strategic Planning to Enrollment in a Community College

2004 - Louis D. Hunt
What’s Your Social? Replacing the Social Security Number

2005 - John Fletcher
Get Ahead and Stay Ahead: Summers at Auburn
Creating a Program to Maximize Your Summer Enrollment

2006 - Magdalena H. Williams
Achievement and Retention Patterns in a Predominantly Hispanic Serving Institution of Higher Education

2007 - Matthew P. McCrickard
Adapting Solution Focused Advising: Effective Communication Strategies for Registrars

2008 - Ronald G. White
Experience Marketing: Putting Students on the Frontline...Again

2009 - Lisa B. Harris
The Enrollment Manager as a Change Agent

2010 - Holly Swart
Strategic Training and Communication: The Keys to Our Successful System Implementation

2011 - Matthew P. McCrickard
Accentuate the Positive: Identifying Opportunities in Enrollment Services through Appreciative Inquiry

2012 - Reta Pikowsky
Assessment in the Registrar’s Office

2013 - Rodney L. Parks and Jonathan W. Rich
Voices from the Past: Boomers Transition Back to College

2014 - Rodney L. Parks and Ashley D. Edwards
Transgenderism and the College Experience: Transitioning Challenges During Higher Education
Staff Perceptions of Work-Environment Factors Affecting Morale in Southeastern Registrar’s Offices

Rheanna Plemons is the Assistant Registrar at Western Kentucky University. She holds a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership with an emphasis in Organizational Leadership from Western Kentucky University. In addition, she holds a Master of Science degree in Library Media Education with an emphasis in Educational Technology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Allied Language Arts. Rheanna is currently the President of the KyACRAO. Her research interests include effective leadership strategies, workplace communication, office morale, and professional development opportunities for staff.

The Office of the Registrar is the oldest administrative unit in higher education. Quann (1979) described the primary functions of the Office of the Registrar as the oversight of registration, grade reporting, record keeping, transcripts, certification, and catalog preparation. These responsibilities are crucial for the prosperity of the university. Accuracy is necessary within the office; Blaney (2009) linked staff accuracy with student persistence or retention in higher education. Therefore, the registrar’s office must produce quality work, while providing customer service for faculty, staff, students, and the community.

Research is prevalent in higher education morale research particularly among administrators; however, morale research is limited among support staff in the Office of the Registrar. The staff within the office are considered frontline workers, as they often are the first point of contact for students (Fifolt, 2010). Morale studies in higher education have focused on faculty or mid-level managers (Ngambi, 2011; Rosser, 2004; Bryson, 2004). This study is significant for registrars interested in job functions that lower morale and who are searching for effective motivators. Leadership strategies were explored, and participants were asked to discuss the Office of the Registrar’s role in the retention of students.

Methodology

This study used a small sample size drawn from four public institutions with similar organizational structures. Focus groups were utilized at three of the institutions, and a semi-structured interview was conducted at one institution. The goal of the focus groups and background questionnaire was to answer six empirical research questions. An interview guide was distributed to each focus group participant (and the semi-structured interview participant) on the day of the session. The researcher facilitated the discussion and helped transition between questions. The duration of the focus groups was approximately 60 minutes at each institution. Participants varied in age, years of experience, morale levels, and educational background.

Prior to using the interview guide and background questionnaire, both instruments were reviewed by two experts in the field and a methodologist. After receiving approval for the study from each registrar’s office, the researcher received approval from the WKU Institutional Review Board. To ensure a seamless process, a pilot study was conducted using a panel of volunteers. Letters of support were received from five registrars at public institutions, as well as from the President of a state Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

The sessions were digitally recorded, and the data were transcribed. Primarily, qualitative data analysis using a grounded theory approach was utilized to determine emerging themes. Quantitative analyses were conducted utilizing the demographic information with the Fisher’s Exact Test and Chi Square, to determine the significance of age and years of experience on specific leadership styles and motivators.

Limitations of Study

The study involved regional registrar offices, which have similar structural and organizational models. The institutions face similar challenges, when attempting...
to meet retention and graduation expectations. Also, the study focused on non-management staff perceptions of the work environment and did not offer a comparison on how this differs from management’s perceptions. This study is qualitative and uses semi-structured focus groups to make generalizations within similar state universities. However, the goal of this study is to create a framework for a quantitative study to collect more data to create generalizations.

Research Questions and Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the level of morale in the office?

Discussion. Participants identified perceived characteristics of individuals with low or high morale; this was a list of adjectives or phrases rather than pinpointing individuals in the office with high or low morale. The overall mood and behavior of an individual were considered key to making a morale interpretation among the staff. Low morale was identified through perceived negative customer service interactions or poor interactions with coworkers. Strank (2005) supported this supposition by saying the following about low morale: “This feeling is reflected in attitudes to management, the job and the organization as a whole” (p. 117). High morale was identified through a perceived willingness to help others in the office and display of positive attitude, which is supported by Peterson, Park, and Sweeney (2008) who noted that morale is evident through “perseverance, courage, resilience, and success” according to an analysis of literature (p. 29).

Most of the participants agreed length of employment was related to low morale. The relationship between length of employment, morale, and change was discussed in great length. Younger employees felt their older counterparts were more likely to have low morale when confronted with change. Younger was defined as less than 44 years of age; older was defined as older than 45 years of age. Reed, Doty, and May (2005) agreed older employees may experience difficulties with change related to new technology.

Research Question 2: To what extent are registrar’s office work-related functions related to low morale?

Discussion. In general, the primary job responsibilities for the Office of the Registrar were identified as maintaining student records, athletic certification, degree certification, catalog preparation, room scheduling, VA Certification, determining residency, issuing transcripts, and processing name and address changes. The job responsibilities were aligned with Quann’s (1979) description in his writings.

As many services are provided by the Office of the Registrar, the busy times vary within the divisions in the office. Transcript request areas are busy at the end of the semester; whereas, the registration area is busy at the beginning of the semester. During these times, staff members indicated that morale suffered because of the stress from the workload. Strank (2005) emphasized busy times can cause more workplace errors and diminish quality. One conclusion found from this study is supervisors must consider reducing stress during peak work times. Slower times allow for camaraderie and teamwork to complete massive projects. Morale was linked to busy work times within the office.

Workers noted low morale was a by-product of having to tell students bad news, such as the student cannot graduate or does not meet residency requirements. Dealing with negative students with accusatory attitudes also brought morale to a minimum. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) conducted research and found bad was stronger than good, i.e., humans respond more negatively to negative rather than to positive. Managers must take into account the negative workplace activities, as these interactions will overpower the positive activities and lead to lower morale.

Research Question 3: How do staff view work environment motivators in relation to morale:

3.a: Monetary awards

Discussion. All workers felt monetary awards would boost morale. However, some admitted resentment when certain individuals received raises and others did not. This is especially true when a team atmosphere is encouraged. Those in the focus groups revealed monetary awards were an inconsistent morale booster, and a raise is needed frequently to maintain high morale. This finding supports Gellerman’s (1963) summary of The Pittsburg Studies, where money was determined to sustain morale, but not boost morale.

3.b: Alternative work schedules

Discussion. Alternate work schedules boost morale, according to the majority of participants. While the possibility is currently limited in three of the offices that participated in this study, one office allowed an hour variation. Some workers came in early; some came in late. Those who opted for the alternate schedule were given an hour of time to catch up on work without customer foot traffic. This reduced workplace stress and boosted morale. Strank (2005) supported this opinion and suggested alternate work schedules as a reasonable way to reduce stress, if the work schedule is feasible for the office. Atkinson and Hall (2011) found allowing employees control over their work schedule not only reduced stress, but it increased happiness. Happy employees were more willing to go above and beyond the job requirements to serve customers. Beatty and Burroughs (1999) suggested alternate work schedules are “an attractive benefit for employees at many different stages of their personal and professional lives (p. 599). Rappaport, Bancroft, and Okum (2003) noted aging employees would benefit greatly from an alternate work schedule.
3.c: Relationships

Discussion. Relationships were essential and helped many maintain a high morale. The research revealed relationships help individuals find balance between their personal and professional lives. Dike (2012) said leaders who encourage friendships within the office will have “higher productivity, quality, and lower turnover” (p. 193). Sharing experiences with a friend eased burdens and reduced stress. This finding coincided with the research of Sias and Cahill (1998), who documented employees turn to office friends who share similar life experiences to express frustrations with supervisors, cope with unwanted change, and to discuss personal conflicts at home. The participants described the office as a family, which helped deal with internal conflict. As with families, the offices with high morale resolved conflicts quickly so business could continue as normal. Participants unknowingly were following the advice of Tjosvold, Dann, and Wong (1992) whose research emphasized the appropriate management of conflict was “central to the basic mission of the organization,” because the method used to address the conflict directly relates to the outcome and the customer service provided.

3.d: Other

Discussion. The research included other motivators used by managers to boost morale, including food and holiday celebrations. Staff enjoy celebrating special occasions such as Halloween. Food was not mentioned as a motivator around “family-heavy” holidays such as Thanksgiving or Christmas. During these seasons, staff members preferred finishing work quickly to get home where preparations could be made for family commitments. Food days were mentioned as a source of stress for some, who felt deciding on the perfect dish was an unwanted challenge. Simply having lunch together provided greater motivation than being expected to bring food for everyone. Farrant (1990) suggested a break room for employees to eat together or spend leisure time was an effective way to boost morale of employees and build relationships.

Research Question 4: What work environment leadership strategies promote high morale among office staff:

4.a: Teamwork

Discussion. Teamwork was promoted in most work environments and was cited as a leadership strategy to boost morale. Cross-training was deemed a valuable asset and reduced stress within three of the offices. Staff members expressed relief in knowing critical job functions would be completed in their absence, which helped to provide balance between home and work. The teamwork discussion was grounded in Preinkert’s (2005) thoughts, in which she stated, “Continuity of employment is more important in the registrar’s office than in most other offices in the institution, especially in the key positions” (p. 9). In addition, Quann (1979) noted the registrar has “major duties and tasks to perform that cannot be delayed or tabled” (p. 128). Cross-training promotes continuity of employment and ensures essential functions will continue when employees must be absent. Farrant (1990) suggested rotating jobs to build morale within the office.

4.b: Empowerment

Discussion. Participants were uncomfortable making decisions within the office; therefore, empowerment was not discussed as a means to boost morale. All felt a responsibility to consult a supervisor before making minor decisions. Porterfield (2003) listed this as a characteristic of micromanagement; the study showed the group did not feel they were micromanaged. However, the group felt if a decision had to be made without a supervisor’s consent, the decision would be supported by mid-level managers. The undergraduate catalog was identified as a tool to help in making decisions. One participant felt decisions were easy to make, since the Office of the Registrar was charged with enforcing approved policy. Her position was the following: “We have guidelines and regulations, and we stick to our guns.”

Participants voiced negative comments about micromanagement in the workplace. Staff members felt those who micromanaged lacked trust. This sentiment was documented in Fracaro’s (2007) research, in which he said micromanagement would impact the trust between employees and the employers. He emphasized those who feel micromanaged will eventually show a decline in productivity and will be unwilling to make sacrifices for the organization.

4.c: Praise

Discussion. Praise is a powerful method to boost morale. Staff appreciated non-verbal and verbal praise. However, all agreed the praise should match the individual’s personality, and Bell (2010) supported that conclusion. Some preferred to receive praise through email, rather than receiving praise in front of peers. Managers who fail to praise staff will see low morale in the office, as staff feel unappreciated for the work they complete. Robison (2006) indicated humans crave praise; however, the praise should be unexpected. The participants in this research project said praise should not be constant, because the value depreciated if given too frequently.

4.d: Other

Discussion. Leaders who encourage staff members to attend professional development events should expect to see increased morale. These strategies allow staff members to create morale boosters within the office, instead of the responsibility falling on managers. Beatty and Burroughs (1999) found aging employees were more likely to receive less training or professional development than younger employees. Therefore, leaders should take advantage of professional conferences and workshops to boost the morale of all employees.

Research Question 5: To what extent does morale create a barrier toward meeting the office mission?

Discussion. Surprisingly, the research showed none of the participants were able to share components of the office mission. A few participants discussed the university’s mission; one
said completing her job was fulfilling the office mission. When prompted, the participants indicated they believed customer service and the retention of records was a part of their mission. Because employees were unable to discuss or locate the office mission, a commitment gap was found. Bennis and Nanus (2007) suggested closing the commitment gap would motivate employees. Workers should play a role in writing the office vision and mission in order to feel a sense of accomplishment as it is fulfilled. Furthermore, Bennis and Nanus emphasized, “In order for an organization to have integrity, it must have an identity – that is, a sense of who it is and what it is to do” (p. 47).

5.a: Customer service

Discussion. Staff recognized customer service as a key component of the office mission and reported those with low morale provided lower quality customer service and caused negative interactions with customers. The registrar’s office is sometimes fraught with students who blame the office when they fail to complete graduation requirements. Staff felt students who are negative or who do not appreciate help cause low morale. Workers who are blamed or treated badly by students are prone to offering suboptimal customer service. Dijulius (2003) discussed boosting morale in customer service settings to create passionate team members. In addition, he surmised frontline workers must provide optimal customer service while juggling several tasks. This is crucial, as they are the face of the office.

5.b: Retention

Discussion. Participants defined themselves as frontline workers who have the ability to influence students’ decisions to remain at the university. When discussing retention, the research revealed the Office of the Registrar felt staff played a vital role in the retention of students. Workers recognized students may make a decision to remain at the institution based on the way they are treated by staff. Employees assumed students preferred not to be directed to other offices and strived to create a small-town or home-like atmosphere to appeal to students and parents. While research in this area is scant, the philosophy is similar to that of workers who deal with negative students. The Baumeister et al. (2001) research found that negative experiences are remembered more readily than positive experiences. The same could be true for customer experiences within the office.

5.c: Job completion

Discussion. The staff felt morale did not affect job completion. Even those employees with the lowest morale could complete the job; however, they may take limited pride in their work. The participants answered this question from the approach of data entry or processing. Based on previous answers, morale clearly affects customer service. Staff members did not associate job completion with quality customer service. However, Strank (2005) theorized stressful situations would cause poor quality work within the office.

Research Question 6: To what extent do demographic factors relate to the questions above?

6.a: Gender

Discussion. As all participants were female, this question held no significance for the study. Even though males did not participate, males who work in this female dominated profession may have low morale. As stated earlier, relationships among staff are crucial. Females typically create friendships based on personal similarities, whereas men may find the development of friendships to be a challenge in this female dominated field.

6.b: Age

Discussion. Using the Fisher’s Exact Test, age showed no significance on morale, motivators, or leadership styles. However, younger employees viewed their older counterparts as having lower morale. One of the participants, classified as being older, stated her morale was low. However, she unhappily remained at the job for the benefits, which included time off and insurance. Rappaport et al. (2003) reported on low morale among older workers who were financially unable to retire. Younger employees would simply leave, if the job caused low morale for an extended period of time. In addition, older employees were less likely to enjoy food days because of the added stress. Younger employees were more prone to want alternate or flexible work schedules to ease stress at home. All participants indicated open communication and praise were motivators. Therefore, these items were constant, and free motivators leading to high morale. Weiss (2011) agreed that employees want to be “in the know” (p. 23).

6.c: Educational level

Discussion. All participants had similar degree types; therefore, this question held no significance for the study. However, those with higher level degrees may display higher morale, as these individuals have more opportunities for advancement.

6.d: Years of service in office

Discussion. Years of service had no significance based on the Fisher’s Exact Test. However, individual results showed those with fewer years of experience were more likely to retain high morale through a change. Those with more experience perceived those with fewer years accepted this change, because the younger employees were naïve. Those with more years of experience perceived they were able to accept change with high morale, because they had been through more changes. All participants said open communication and praise were motivators. Strank (2005) reported change is a source of stress in the workplace. He emphasized, “Effective communication is the answer to reducing the stress associated with change” (p. 83). Therefore, communication and praise are free and provide constant motivation for employees to have high morale. Baird and Bradley (1978) stated that an employer’s communication strategy with subordinates is correlated with the morale of the office.

Recommendations

Recommendations are in three divisions: Office considerations, university considerations, and suggestions for future
research. “Office considerations” provides suggestions to leaders within the Office of the Registrar. “University considerations” provides suggestions for academic and non-academic administrators. The “Suggestions for Future Study” provides ideas for future research within higher education and the Office of the Registrar.

Office Considerations

Leaders within Offices of the Registrar must recognize the existing family paradigm. Staff members require time for socialization to discuss work and personal issues, which will help to find a balance between work and personal life. Female staff members gravitate toward others who have similar backgrounds or family structures. These friendships help with enduring change and conflict.

The family paradigm is important when dealing with office conflict. When employees perceive one another as part of a big family, they are more willing to move past conflict. Similar to family, staff know they must interact with the individual causing the conflict and must make the relationship work for the sake of the family or work environment. Open communication is encouraged to help overcome a conflict. Workers may need time to talk through the problem, and leaders must take the conflict seriously.

Support is a component of the family paradigm. Family members often are called upon to fulfill various roles in the absence of others. Similarly, an office should be cross-trained and a teamwork mentality encouraged among staff members. When individuals are sick, take vacations, attend conferences, or must be elsewhere, they should know their job responsibilities will continue. In addition, support will help ease workplace stress during peak times, which were shown to lower morale.

Leaders must recognize the importance of praise in the work environment. Praise is free, and all participants said the effective use of praise would boost morale. Praise should match the personality of the individual and warranted. Leaders must remember those who promote teamwork must praise the entire team, rather than recognizing only the leader. Team members who do not receive equal praise will eventually resent the leader and have no desire to complete future tasks.

In addition to praise, leaders should promote open communication within the office. Potential changes should be discussed thoroughly to ease stress and tension. Leaders should be open to suggestions from staff who may have new ideas for office procedures or opinions about the work environment. Open communication involves active listening; leaders should listen to staff concerns and problems, whether the issues are related to work or home.

Alternate work schedules should be considered when searching for ways to boost morale. These schedules are practical and effective in boosting the morale of all employees. Office hours can remain normal; however, allowing staff to work alternate schedules promotes trust, which is essential for individuals to feel a sense of belonging. Alternate work schedules can assist those with school-aged children, as well as those with aging parents. An effective Office of the Registrar experiences limited turnover. In an effort to retain employees and eliminate stress, leaders should be open to new concepts relating to schedules, if the university allows such flexibility.

The most significant finding was that none of the participants knew the office mission or where the mission is located. Each listed assumptions concerning the goals of the mission. Staff should actively participate in the creation of an office vision and mission in order to have ownership and to define the meaning of quality within the office. Individuals may have different opinions on quality customer service; therefore, staff should work together to define job responsibilities and expectations for positive customer service experiences. During this research, staff spoke vaguely about what they perceived to be the mission. The most common components were customer service and maintenance of records. However, in later conversations, participants perceived that customer service was linked to the retention of students, which was not mentioned as part of the office mission. Working together to establish a mission would remove silos in the office and encourage coworkers to fully understand the functions of different areas. As mentioned previously, creating an office mission ensures the office has integrity and identity of the office (Bennis & Nanus, 2007).

Attitudes, mannerisms, and interactions are part of customer service. Therefore, leaders must recognize job functions that cause low morale and strive to improve morale during high-demand work times. Food days may cause added stress; therefore, leaders may consider providing food, rather than asking others to bring items. Leaders also should be willing to appoint an individual to coordinate such activities, as they may suffer fatigue from planning morale boosters.

University Considerations

From a university perspective, the importance of the services rendered in the Office of the Registrar is paramount. The office plays a vital role in the mission of the university through enforcing policies, maintaining the course inventories, publishing the undergraduate catalog, graduating students, maintaining class rolls, etc. The morale of the staff also plays a part in the quality of the services. Therefore, administrators must consider similar motivators and leadership styles as those used by mid-level management within the office, such as assistant and associate registrars.

Open communication is a necessity. Change causes stress and lowers morale; however, time can ease the burdens associated with new policies. When the value and experience of the office is considered, the need for discussion when proposing new policies is obvious. Leaders and staff should not be blinded by new initiatives and policies. When this happens, self-worth is compromised and employees begin to believe they do not matter. This will result in turnover, which is disastrous to an
office that flourishes on continuity and an acquired knowledge base, such as a registrar’s office.

Praise from administrators is appreciated. Recognition for the completion of necessary functions is a way of boosting morale. Receiving notification of a job well done for working a commencement or another successful publication communicates that their work is appreciated and necessary. This builds employee allegiance to the university.

Future Studies

This study was limited to institutions in the Southeastern region with similar organizational structure and enrollments. Therefore, opportunities for future studies are endless. First, those interested in morale may follow a similar model in their home state to examine morale within a system or among institutions with similar structures and enrollments. Also, morale can be studied in organizations with differing structures to determine which structure promotes the highest morale.

Qualitative research provides a basis for quantitative research. Qualitative studies typically have small sample sizes; therefore, a researcher could develop a survey to administer to the masses. The creation of such a survey would suffice as one research project. In another study, the survey could be administered to collect data. Studies of this magnitude would be interesting at the national level and could be used to develop a list of best practices.

From a student perspective, a morale study could be conducted regarding the level of service received within the Office of the Registrar. The research could be expanded to students who left an institution to determine whether customer service was linked to the decision to leave. Retention studies of this nature could impact customer service training conducted for employees.

Conclusions

This qualitative study was conducted in Offices of the Registrar within the Southeastern region of the United States having similar organizational structure and enrollments. A grounded theory approach was used to conduct three focus groups and one semi-structured interview. A background questionnaire was used to collect demographic information, and themes emerged from coding the data. To determine significance of age and years of experience, a Fisher’s Exact Test was utilized in addition to the Chi Square. The Chi Square was insignificant due to the small sample size.

Participants were asked to define an individual with low and high morale. An individual with low morale was defined as not willing to help others; mannerism and interactions also were used to determine low morale. Individuals with high morale were defined as happy and willing to help. Participants reported that morale suffered during peak work times, as staff felt overworked and stressed. Slow times were used to build relationships and promote teamwork within the office.

The offices had similar job functions, which included registration, posting degrees, maintaining records, articulating transfer work, overseeing the course inventory, conducting name and address changes, and other necessary tasks. The entire graduation process was determined to be the highest risk of low morale. Long work days and delivering negative news to hopeful graduates were discussed as negative components of the position.

Relationships, praise, alternate work schedules, attending conferences or professional developments, and open communication were listed as effective ways to boost morale. Relationships included teamwork, cross-training, and friendships. The happiest offices had some degree of teamwork and cross-training. Friendships were helpful in finding balance between personal and work life. Alternate work schedules also were a source of balance between personal and work life; the schedules also encouraged low turnover in the office. Allowing employees to attend conferences or professional development gave them a sense of belonging and built trust. Open communication allowed employees to know they mattered in the decision-making process and helped them prepare for upcoming changes.

None of the participants were aware of the office mission, which illustrated a commitment gap to be addressed. Input in the vision and mission of the office provides ownership to the employee. Despite the participants’ inability to recite or identify the components of the office mission, all felt their job was grounded in customer service and influenced the retention of students.

Years of experience and age had no influence on motivators or leadership styles used to boost morale. However, open communication and praise were constant, free motivators that all agreed boosted morale. Leaders within the office and administrators outside of the office should be cognizant of the impact of open communication and the effective use of praise. The possibilities for future studies are limitless, as studies on morale can be conducted in any state using differing institutions. The research could be expanded into a quantitative study to collect more data, with the goal of creating best practices in the field.

This study is significant, in that registrars can begin working toward office improvements to boost morale. A staff with high morale will improve customer service experiences and create a dynamic workforce willing to go beyond the requirements of the position. The office with the lowest morale had different divisions within its structure which operated similar to individual silos. The office provided limited cross-training, and turnover caused uncertainty and tension. The offices with the highest morale defined the work environment as a family, was cross-trained, and non-management staff addressed the task of boosting morale. This study revealed which staff would excel in the statewide initiatives of retention and graduation of students. Happy employees will work together, assist students, and propel the Office of the Registrar to a model within the university.
REFERENCES


Transitioning Challenges for International Student-Athletes

Rodney L. Parks is the Registrar, Director of Summer Programs, and Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Services Studies at Elon University. Dr. Parks is active in SACRAO and has served for the past two years as SACRAO’s Newsletter Editor. This is Dr. Parks third year of mentoring undergraduate students to conduct research and publish research in the SACRAO journal. He works diligently to better understand the unique needs of minority student populations on today’s college campuses to encourage campuses to invest resources in helping these students succeed.

Ben Perron is an Alum of Elon University earning his B.S. in Accounting in May of 2014. Ben served as a Research Assistant during the Spring 2014 term working diligently to collect the qualitative data used in this study. As a student athlete, Mr. Perron ran Cross Country for four years for Elon University. During his time as an Athlete, Mr. Perron developed a passion for working with international athletes and helping them blend well into Elon Culture. His passion and experience as a student athlete led to the development of this research project.

Phyllicia Pearl W. Mpasi is a Student Assistant for the Office of the Registrar at Elon University in Elon, North Carolina. She is a senior currently pursuing a BFA in Music Theatre with a minor in Communications. In addition to her research interest in helping international student-athletes transition successfully into the US higher education system, Ms. Mpasi is also the editor of the new Student Worker Newsletter for the Registrar’s Office, a publication to make students aware of the “work of the Registrar.”

Introduction

The student-athlete recruitment landscape for U.S. institutions of higher education has expanded beyond domestic borders, resulting in an influx of international student-athletes to American colleges and universities (Popp, Pierce, & Hums, 2011). Student-athletes come from around the world to take advantage of the opportunity to earn a U.S. undergraduate degree and to compete in their sport at the collegiate level. Yet a number of obstacles may hinder the success of the growing population of international student-athletes in the U.S. (Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009). Current research on the academic performance of NCAA Division I student-athletes and international students generally suggests the presence of an institutional environment that hinders academic persistence. However, researchers have yet to determine whether this is due to the actions of the students or a lack of action from university administrators (Kitsos, 2012). Student-athletes from abroad face significant barriers in attending U.S. institutions. Problems may arise both during the transition into the university and throughout the remainder of college. Administrators and academic advisors in higher education must continually strive to offer better support for this unique population of students. Should international student-athletes find success in college, improved graduation rates and even assimilation into the U.S. after graduation will become more likely (Bale, 1991). There is a great desire among many international student-athletes to remain in the U.S. following college (Selbe, 2013). Providing these students access to appropriate resources and support systems in college can therefore not only improve their integration into campus life, but also increase their long-term chances of succeeding academically and professionally in the U.S.

Literature Review

Previous research on international student-athletes has explored both the initial transition these students must make into U.S. higher education and their experiences throughout college (Kitsos, 2012). This research has
focused primarily on three areas: the adjustment of international student-athletes to U.S. universities, cultural differences between international and domestic student-athletes, and the satisfaction of international student-athletes with their university experience. Guest’s (2007) work studying two male soccer teams from the U.S. and Malawi offers meaningful insight into sport and its related cultural contexts. Sport, Guest found, is an “empty cultural form,” whose meaning is derived from the manner of expression it finds in a local culture (Guest, 2007, p. 1).

The teams Guest studied clearly expressed that despite the shared meanings of their sport that transcended national boundaries, the teams’ cultural differences also shape the sport as they experience it. Intercolligiate sport in the U.S., then, is bound to have meanings that are tied directly to the individuals who participate and their particular cultural backgrounds, as well as to the culture in which the sports team is playing. Thus, if a team on a U.S. campus is comprised entirely of international students, the meaning of the sport will be affected both by the players and by the fact that they are playing in the U.S. and not in their home countries. Sport is meaningful to the extent that its participants give it meaning.

Scholars have found significant differences between international and domestic student-athletes, particularly in the criteria each group considers in selecting an institution and in their views of the purpose of competing at the intercollegiate level. Popp, Pierce, and Hums (2011) found that the amount of scholarship funding available, as well as the personality of the head coach, factored most highly into the international student-athletes’ college selection. Domestic student-athletes, in contrast, rated a degree from the school leading to a good job and the school’s overall reputation as the most important factors. Interestingly, female student-athletes, regardless of residency status, rated academic factors more highly than their male counterparts, who rated athletic factors more highly than female student-athletes. This difference is in line with the documented data between the general population of male and female students in their perceived emphasis on academic versus athletic performance (Popp, Pierce, & Hums, 2011).

Popp, Hums, and Greenwell (2009), using Duda’s 29-item Purpose of Sport Questionnaire, found that international student-athletes valued the importance of competition significantly less than their domestic counterparts. Sport, for these student-athletes, was less about competition than about the other benefits that could be gleaned from it, including character development and a sense of accomplishment. Guest (2007) suggested that domestic student-athletes view athletics as a competitive proving ground where they desire to overcome challenges, obstacles, and opponents. When interviewed regarding their experiences, players from Malawi reported that participation is a means of expressing their abilities and talents, regardless of competitive success. In fact, most generic student-athletes, be it domestic or international, coach their collegiate success primarily in athletic success while most international students define academic achievement and personal growth as critical motivations for success (Popp, Hums, Greenwell, 2009).

Popp (2007) found that international student-athletes rated lower than domestic student-athletes on measures of social adjustment and institutional attachment to the host institution. This finding is similar to that of Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004), who studied male international students studying in Canada. They found that, among 156 male international students, in general, culture shock had a greater impact the greater the cross-cultural difference between the student’s home country and Canada. Social interaction increased or decreased in inverse proportion to the degree of cross-cultural difference between Canadian culture and the student’s home culture. Another factor influencing social interaction and adjustment was the size of the cohort from the international student’s home country. The greater the number of fellow nationals accompanying students to the university, the less likely they were to interact with individuals from the host country.

Popp, Love, Kim, and Hums (2010), evaluating Ridinger and Pastore’s (2000) antecedent factors for measuring international student-athlete adjustment to college, found correlations in the actual experiences of international student-athletes and broadened the model a bit more. While the impact of faculty and staff on the successful adjustment of international student-athletes appeared to be marginal, three additional factors seemed to play a role: sense of adventure, previous international travel experience, and family influence. These factors, along with others related to academic, athletic, and social adjustment, effectively predicted the adjustment of international student-athletes to college.

Adler (1975) defines a transitional experience as a “movement from a state of low self and cultural awareness to a state of high self and cultural awareness” (p. 15). In his study, he examined the transitional experiences of people experiencing a new culture, especially in diverse, cross-cultural contexts where culture shock is relevant (Adler, 1975). He outlines the frustration, emotional volatility, and eventual growth that typically accompany any transition from one cultural context to another, noting the processes of learning and personal transformation that often result from such experiences. Pierce, Popp, and Meadows (2012) corroborate this insight, finding that international student-athletes consider homesickness and cultural differences to be among the most significant barriers to competing and studying abroad. Most helpful in smoothing these transitions was the presence of a strong support system provided by teammates and coaches at the host university, as well as family and friends back home.

Key factors that draw international student-athletes to study in the U.S. include the opportunity to combine education with competition, the scholarship assistance offered by U.S. institutions, and the desire of international student-athletes to experience something new and unconventional compared to their home lives (Kontaxakis, 2011). Language barriers and overall
cultural adjustment were the most decisive factors influencing the retention of international student-athletes (Kontaxakis, 2011). Lee and Opio (2011) found that cultural barriers negatively impact the experiences of international student-athletes, documenting instances of overt discrimination based on negative perceptions of the home countries of 16 international student-athletes.

Trendafilova, Hardin, and Kim (2010) found that the treatment of international student-athletes by the coaching staff has a significant impact on satisfaction. Interestingly, males reported a higher satisfaction rate with external agents like the media than their female counterparts. In general, student-athletes on scholarships reported higher satisfaction with budgetary realities than those student athletes who were not receiving any financial support from their institution. The work of Medic, et. al, (2007) argues that “athletic scholarships affect student athletes’ motivation to participate in sport,” and these scholarships are great incentive for international students to continue their athletic and academic pursuits in the U.S. (Trendafilova, Hardin, and Kim, 2010). Adler and Adler (1985) documented the relationship between athletic and academic performance among athletes at NCAA Division I institutions. They found that student-athletes, in general, enter college with idealistic expectations for their academic performance—expectations that tend to be adjusted upon experiencing the demands and intensity of student-athlete commitments. Academic performance, they found, tended to be regarded with less concern by student-athletes toward the end of college than during their college career when student-athletes had to remain academically eligible to participate in their sport.

Research Methods and Procedures

This study aims to understand and interpret the lived experiences of nine international student-athletes at a medium-sized NCAA Division I private university in the southeastern U.S. The study seeks to gain insight into the barriers the student-athletes face and offer policy recommendations for university administrators and academic and athletic support staff. This mixed methods study employed a convergent design, whereby a brief quantitative survey was administered alongside in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Interview questions were designed to elicit rich, thick descriptions of the student-athletes’ experiences. The quantitative results are used to frame the qualitative interviews, which provided the bulk of the data.

Participants

Snowball sampling was used to recruit nine participants. Initial contacts were made with participants who referred the researchers to other international student-athletes. The nine participants included four males and five females, ranging from first-year students to fourth-year students. Five of the student-athletes were from European countries, along with one from Iceland, two from Central or South America, and one from Africa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<td>Women’s Tennis</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Marketing, Management</td>
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<td>Men’s Soccer</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>International Business</td>
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<td>Women’s Tennis</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Finance, Management</td>
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Data Collection

Participants were asked to respond to an emailed, three-part survey. The survey included demographic questions, Likert-type questions, and open-ended questions designed to solicit data about the barriers to academic success participants faced while in college. Respondents were then asked to complete an in-person interview at a time and location of their choosing. Five participants agreed to a semi-structured interview. Interview questions were guided by survey data and ranged from 20 to 40 minutes in length. Interviewees read and signed an informed consent form before each interview, and were given the opportunity to review and comment on the accuracy of the transcribed interview after its completion.

All respondents completed surveys related to their overall experience in college. Quantitative data was analyzed for significant themes and used to focus subsequent qualitative data collection. Upon completion, each interview was transcribed and the transcript was sent to the interviewee for member checking to improve validity. Transcribed interviews were coded and examined independently by a three-member research team. The researchers then met to compare their findings and assemble the group data into relevant themes.

Survey Results

Data collected from a brief quantitative survey were used to guide the semi-structured interviews that followed. Survey questions sought to identify key challenges international student-athletes face as they seek to integrate into the U.S. higher education system, as well as perceived barriers to their academic success. The survey revealed a number of valuable findings. Responses were mixed on whether international student-athletes confront greater barriers than domestic student-athletes, as 33% agreed with the statement, “I face significant challenges as an international student-athlete compared to non-international student-athletes.” However, 55% of the participants expressed confidence in their institution’s ability to help them overcome challenges by agreeing with the statement, “[This institution] enables me to overcome the barriers that I face as an international student-athlete.”

Survey results provided additional insight into the areas of academic success and social integration. In recent decades, increased academic support has improved academic success and graduation rates among NCAA Division I student-athletes (Ridpath, 2010). Survey results were consistent with this, as two-thirds of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their academic advisor in athletics was “always helpful” when they needed assistance. Almost 90 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I have achieved academic success in college.” In addition, over 75 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are well-prepared to graduate from college.

The statement, “My academic advisor in athletics encouraged me to major in that which most appealed to me” met with more disagreement from the respondents: two-thirds of the respondents disagreed or were neutral in response to this statement. Less positive feedback in this instance may result from the academic support staff’s focus on achieving high graduation rates, which may lead them to shepherd student-athletes into easier but less-satisfying majors; it may also reflect the respondents’ lack of confidence in the major they chose (Ridpath, 2010). Quantitative results suggest overall satisfaction with the academic support offered to student-athletes at this institution, with potential reservations when it comes to major choice and the guidance available to help students choose a major.

International student-athletes inevitably encounter social obstacles during their time abroad (Popp, Love, Kim, & Huns, 2010). Nevertheless, in response to the statement, “I am satisfied with the relationships that I currently have with others at college,” almost 90 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Likewise, almost 90 percent of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, “I am uncomfortable as an international student-athlete in the classroom or elsewhere.” Respondents were largely at ease in their surroundings and fulfilled by their relationships with others at college.

Highlights of Qualitative Findings

The researchers categorized the issues described by participants into four themes: academic, socialization, mentoring, and transitioning challenges before and after college.

Academic

Academic issues were common subjects of discussion in the interviews. Participants described difficulties related to academic advising, career development opportunities, and institutional policies regarding transfer credits or the grading system. Two participants related their struggle to choose both appropriate classes and a major with a lucrative job market. Chris described his experience choosing classes before coming to the university: “Before I came here I already had to select classes, and I kind of felt left alone at that moment because I had no idea . . . what I should take in the first semester.” Breana also expressed dissatisfaction with the advising offered by the university. She described her own and her parents’ uncertainty about the available majors, and reported having to add a major later in college to be more competitive in the job market after graduation. Both student-athletes regretted that advice was not offered to them before their arrival or early in their college career, enabling them to make more informed decisions about classes and majors.

Additional issues centered on career development and the process of finding an internship. Participants reported dissatisfaction with the university’s efforts to help them get internships. Breana described the international student-athlete’s experience in pursuing career development and internship opportunities:
There’s always a door open for a student who wants to get help starting their career, but for us it’s different. We don’t have work authorization, so it doesn’t matter how many resumes you put in...because no one’s gonna look at you, because you don’t have that check for the work authorization.

Breana’s frustration was echoed by other participants, who agreed that getting an internship was more difficult due to their international status. One participant recommended that the university improve its internship procurement process for all students, not just international student-athletes.

Participants repeatedly expressed disappointment with institutional policies related to transferring credits and to the grading system. Chris described his inability to transfer credits into the university: “Where I’m from...we’re really advanced with teaching math in high school, and I didn’t get any credit for it here, so I had to do Math 112, Math 116—which I basically did four years ago in high school—again.” Chris also expressed frustration at having to retake other subjects, and described significant differences between the high school grading system in his home country and that of the U.S. “It’s from 1 to 6, where 1 is the best, which is comparable to your system, the letter-grade system. At the end of high school you have points from 1 to 15, 15 as being the best, so it’s completely opposite.” The divergent national systems for awarding grades and credit created challenges for international students trying to transfer credits from their home countries, as policies at this U.S. institution prevented students from preserving all the credits they had previously earned in high school. “I was told there’s no way I can get credit for it since it’s a different language and complete different systems,” Chris reported.

Socialization

Challenges related to socialization stemmed from language differences as well as an inability to relate to the rest of the student body and take part in various institutional traditions. Language differences presented difficulties for all participants whose native language was not English. Maria described her struggles during her first semester: “I definitely needed to spend more time studying than the rest of [the] people, because there’s reading the books in English, looking it up in the dictionary, things like that. I’ve always been a good student. I don’t stop studying until I’m satisfied, so I spent a lot of time doing that.

Other participants discussed the difficulties they experienced in test taking due to language differences, as well as overall fatigue as a result of constantly having to think and translate into English. Breana said, “You have to constantly think in English, which was exhausting. I just remember being tired the entire time.”

Due to their strong motives to attend a college in the U.S., international student-athletes are more mature and may work harder than domestic student-athletes (Asher, 1994). International student-athletes are typically older than domestic student-athletes (Kitsos, 2012), and while the international student may benefit from having more years of experience in their sport, this age difference can also cause awkwardness between peers, especially when it comes to maturity and priorities. Adam explains, “When I first came here, it was kinda awkward, because I had already been a freshman. It’s kinda like you’re a freshman for a second year, even though I’m a sophomore and I’m 22 years old, so I’m really old for a sophomore, too.” Often times, international student-athletes have to juggle the role of being a student and an athlete to successfully satisfy their academic obligations as well as the obligations put upon them by their family, coach, team, athletic department, and the policies and regulations of the NCAA (Watt & Moore, 2001). An inability to participate in various institutional traditions due to dense schedules and priorities was another commonly reported issue. Adam expressed a desire to participate in Greek life, but his athletic participation prohibited this. Among other things, Breana regretted not joining more student organizations and not taking advantage of more extracurricular activities offered by the university.

Mentoring

Most participants expressed a desire for more mentoring, especially going into their university experience and many sought for the mentoring to continue throughout their collegiate career. Chris and Dennis suggested that the university should provide contact information for an older student-athlete, preferably from their own country of origin, to offer guidance to incoming international student-athletes as they transition to the university. They were confident that international student-athletes would be more than willing to offer some form of mentoring to their incoming peers, and believed strongly that they would have benefited from such mentoring.

Breana also identified the need for systematic mentoring of incoming international student-athletes. Commenting on new-student orientation she attended in her first year, Breana stated, “I wish there were more international athletes in the student orientation freshman year, because there’s usually just international students that are not athletes, and that’s a very big difference.” Assistance from an international student-athlete mentor who could offer insight on campus housing, campus activities, classes, and career planning and preparation would have benefited her and was a clear desire of most participants.

Transitioning Challenges

A number of participants described difficulty transitioning into the university due to various institutional policies. Breana regretted having been placed in on-campus housing not suited to her. Thinking back on her housing experiences, Breana expressed:

That wasn’t the best fit for me; it wasn’t at all. And I wish that someone but my coach would’ve made the decision for me.
to live there. I wish they could’ve sent out more brochures that explained every dorm better, from a student standpoint, showed pictures and stuff because I had no idea.

More than one participant identified obstacles related to transportation and to paperwork or tax compliance. Both Chris and Breana reported experiencing frustration and anxiety over these issues. Breana specifically recommended providing more information on the types of transportation options that may be suitable for their housing. “If someone could tell me, ‘maybe you need a bike here’; ‘it’s better if you have a car here’...if someone would’ve told me that, my parents maybe could’ve put in 200 into my account for me to get a good bike. There was never any...they didn’t really help me with that.”

Breana also described her confusion over tax compliance. Unable to file her taxes in the U.S. without an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), Breana was unaware of the need to procure one until her sophomore year. Chris, meanwhile, said he was uncertain initially about how to get his student visa and would have benefited from more information.

Complicating matters further was an inability or unwillingness on the part of administrators to provide certain types of assistance. Breana said, “There’re certain things that I’ve asked [the international student office], personal paperwork questions, and they’re not liable to tell me because they’re scared that they’re gonna get in trouble...Who can I ask if not you, you know?” Breana’s experience suggests that liability concerns may hinder administrators’ ability to assist international students.

Career Advising

While some of the international student-athletes plan to return to their home countries to continue playing their sport professionally; others, like Breana, have aspirations to leave athletics and stay in the U.S. to secure a job:

“I’ve always wanted to stay in America; there’s not a lot of international students that actually stay here, and that’s another sad thing. I mean, American education spent millions to get high-skilled athletes and other students to their education system, but then once they are done they just get kicked out. That’s a huge loss in investment for an American education.

Without the proper guidance from their administration or career advising centers, international students can find it difficult to attain a job while in school, which could hinder their ability to attain a job post-graduation. Like Breana, Adam plans to stay in the U.S. instead of returning home to Brazil and both students agree that their institution could improve on assisting students in attaining internships, a social security number, and a job to sponsor their visa following graduation. Breana, who has since graduated from the university, describes her post-collegiate integration into the U.S. by simply claiming, “It’s so hard,” and wonders why there isn’t more help for students trying to earn an income while in school and potentially after school. “It’s so hard to get a job here because no one’s helping us to get the internship, get the social security number, and get the job sponsors the visa.” In order to better help the students, Breana wishes the career center pointed out which companies are global companies that would welcome an international student’s resume over a domestic student’s resume.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that as international student-athletes matriculate at U.S. universities in increasingly larger numbers, they face a variety of significant barriers to academic success (Selbe, 2013). Participants described numerous difficulties related to academics, particularly in the areas of academic advising, institutional academic policies, and career advising. The students reported that choosing classes before arrival and selecting a competitive major were difficult. They noted that advising before and upon arrival would have helped significantly both in class and major selection.

Participants also identified issues related to socialization and the transition to college. Significant difficulties stemming from the language barrier were common. Participants described their struggle to think, speak, and write in English and the mental and physical toll this took.

Some participants voiced regret at not being able to participate in various student organizations, including Greek life and other extracurricular activities, as a result of their athletic commitments. Several students said they would welcome the opportunity to expand their involvement if their athletic participation would permit it. Navigating housing policies and social security and visa paperwork also proved difficult. Participants were unaware of the need to submit certain forms or procure personal tax identification numbers. Finding means of transportation to get around campus as well as off campus, students reported, also presented a problem. Participants said they would welcome more aid from administrators related to these issues.

In addition to requesting more in-depth academic advising and greater administrative support, participants described their desire for mentoring provided by an older student-athlete, leading up to and throughout their time at the university. They believed such mentoring would help them navigate housing options, campus life decisions like choosing to participate in clubs and classes, and career planning. The participants themselves expressed a willingness to mentor incoming international student-athletes, especially from their country of origin, if the opportunity were offered.

Limitations

A number of limitations must be considered in relation to this study’s findings. Only a small number of students from a
single private university in the southeastern U.S. participated in the study. The use of snowball sampling to identify potential participants limits the likelihood that this sample is representative of the whole population of international student-athletes at this particular university or at institutions throughout the U.S. Ideally, in subsequent studies larger numbers of international student-athletes from a wide variety of institutions will be asked to discuss their college experience, furthering our understanding of the range of their experiences. Future research should also examine whether academic advisors in athletics encourage students to choose majors that most appeal to them or if they instead encourage easier majors that are more conducive to higher graduation rates. Longitudinal study of international student-athletes as they leave college and enter their careers would also be useful.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Despite its limitations, this study suggests a number of ways in which university policies could better accommodate international student-athletes. Universities can assist international student-athletes by providing more counsel prior to and upon arrival at the institution. Instead of an orientation in a lecture hall, students should have the opportunity for a one-on-one conversation with their advisor so any personal questions and questions pertaining specifically to each student’s cultural differences could be answered. This would also allow the advisor-student relationship to begin developing immediately. In addition, the university or international center could provide administrative staff to assist with tax compliance and social security paperwork. Finally, offering mentoring from an older international student-athlete is perhaps the most concrete way to improve the experience of international student-athletes. For incoming student-athletes who hope to stay in the U.S. following college, this mentorship may be especially valuable if the student is paired with a mentor who also has remained or plans to remain in the U.S. beyond graduation. Overall, greater clarity and guidance are needed to help these students navigate the web of socialization, housing options, tax compliance, and academic policies. Such enhancements would enable international student-athletes to enjoy a more successful college experience.
References


Today, it is critical in higher education to retain and graduate students. Universities and colleges have instituted efforts to assist students in making key transitions, growing individually and communally, further honing academic and life skills, and acquiring the appropriate business acumen to be successful in the highly competitive, globalized job market they will face upon graduation. Peer mentoring is an excellent opportunity for new students to gain this development. Peers are trusted quickly and allow for faster integration into the new setting and a greater depth of engagement with the campus culture. The University of Richmond’s Peer Advisors and Mentors (PAM) program focuses on student integration and engagement through key avenues that have a proven record of success over the past decade.

Mentoring

Universities and colleges have adopted both formal and informal peer mentoring programs as a part of the campus-wide efforts to enhance the experience and personal development of first-year students. Informal mentoring programs are key components used to assist incoming students in making the transition from high school to college. Specifically, these programs involve upper-class students mentoring first-year students to promote engagement and integration. Using more experienced students as mentors, rather than staff or faculty, offers the advantage of recent shared personal experiences as students, and thus credibility, to new students who very often are stuck in the high-school mindset of the student-teacher or student-administrator relationships. Thus, the mentoring process allows for a level of familiarity in relationship building that exists between generational peers versus students and staff or faculty. Creating the opportunity for and nurturing these relationships through shared experiences and leadership building is the foundation upon which the PAM program at the University of Richmond is built each year.

Academic Advice

In order to successfully navigate the intricacies of balancing academics and all of the other activities that absorb students’ time and energy, it is critical to have good academic advising. Advising helps students to transition and integrate into the community. Though most institutions provide faculty advisors, there are challenges for students due to faculty often being focused meeting graduation requirements and not the first semester’s success. The 2013 National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) indicates that the first-year
students and seniors who responded communicated with their formal academic advisor only once or twice per year, and “about one in ten students never met with an academic advisor” most often because “…their advisors provided little to no information on academic support options, academic rules and policies, and special opportunities like high impact practices” (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013). It is therefore no surprise that the PAM program, with its informal academic advising component, would be a well-used and helpful source for more informal academic advice. This is in accordance with the NSSE results which indicate that “about a third of first-year students and 18 percent of seniors identified friends or family as the primary source of academic advice” (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013).

The staff that guide the PAM program consistently promote the use of formal academic advising, both through faculty advisors and the University’s Advising Center. The academic advising provided by peers in the PAM program is often more anecdotal and helpful because they understand the rigorous challenges that heavy course loads can create for first-year students in particular—a challenge that may or not be embraced by faculty advisors. It is important to create a balanced mixture of courses to take the first semester of college instead of a full course load of major specific classes (e.g., chemistry, biology, mathematics, business, etc.). For example, enrolling in a course load with calculus, chemistry, biology and a first-year seminar often overwhelms even the strongest first-year students when they have to also deal with competing issues of acclimating to a new university environment. The PAM mentors, connecting across the summer before first semester, have successfully assisted with this informal advising to help create more diverse course loads that help to ensure a stronger start.

Integration Means A Supportive Environment

Due to the ever-present focus on the academic rigor at the University and the diversity of students focused upon for recruitment to the program, PAM was designed to aid in student integration and peer support. This is the most appropriate and effective focus because as integration is the focus, so then engagement is the key for both intrapersonal development and interpersonal development. Both are developed through academic and social engagement, though they are opposite reactions where interpersonal development is in contrast to peers and intrapersonal development is in self-identifying with certain peers in groups. Integration is a student’s self-identification with the university or institutionalized groups within the academic aspect of the university, whereas “social support refers to the establishment of social networks among other students and emotional support from peers and staff” (Hall & Jaugietis, 2010).

The PAM program does not claim to be the sole reason for the retention and graduation of the students that it serves. There are a vast number of factors that contribute to students’ ability, perseverance, and commitment to attaining a degree in higher education. To create an environment that will promote high levels of student success, an institution must support students in a variety of ways, not simply by providing opportunities for engagement and integration. Students must be supported socially, cognitively, and physically with the aim of increased satisfaction and performance. Universities must create an atmosphere of encouragement and support for social growth, physical well-being and advancement, and of course challenging instruction (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The University of Richmond’s success is acknowledged and acclaimed, and this effort is to outline the PAM program’s participation in creating this atmosphere.

The PAM Program

During the 1991-1992 academic year, Hope Walton was hired to establish the Academic Skills Center at the University of Richmond. As the Director of Academic Skills, she developed the Peer Advisors and Mentors (PAM) program following her best practices from her previous creation of formal mentoring programs with alumni and faculty. It was officially implemented as a pilot program in the fall semester of 1992 to assist the African-American students to make the often challenging transition to campus life at a predominately white institution. At that time, African-American students were the largest underrepresented population of students attending the institution. In collaboration among staff from the Academic Skills Center, Multicultural Affairs, and Admissions as well as faculty and students, first-year student mentees were identified and invited to the program.

The PAM program was successful in helping first-year students make a smooth transition to the university environment through engagement and by providing opportunities to hone their leadership skills. Of the first-year students who participated in the first year of the program, 87% returned as second-year students, indicating a strong measure of success for first-year mentees’ integration into the university environment. The students engaged in a variety of organizational activities with their peers and assumed leadership positions in numerous organizations. With success in hand, PAM was expanded the next year to include other ethnically diverse students, including white and international students. Many of the white students during that year were sons and daughters of staff and faculty. Because these students had already been exposed to the University of Richmond due to their parents’ employment and had a very solid level of integration in excess of the PAM program, these students did not benefit as much from their participation in PAM. Accordingly, the program adjusted in subsequent years and continued to select white students but did not actively recruit those who had parents working at the University. Additionally, PAM continued to include ethnically diverse
students, but also selected students from varied socio-economic backgrounds, first generation students, as well as students from rural, suburban, and urban areas. Selection became focused upon creating the most socially conscious, service-minded, and diverse population possible from each year’s pools of applicants.

Following the same basic programming with some modifications, the program has continued to maintain a retention rate of 90% or above, which has been greater than the university’s undergraduate retention for 18 out of 22 years. Noell-Levitz 2013 Student Retention Indicators Benchmark Report indicated that “at four-year private institutions, first year student persistence to the next term was 92 percent...,” a standard often eclipsed by the PAM first-year students returning the following fall semester (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

Adjusting to Growth

The program went through various evolutions as its population grew in numbers year after year. Since transitioning is the process that includes the establishment of new emotional and intellectual support systems, connecting with successful students to engage socially is critical the first semester. Accordingly, mentees were matched to mentors based upon gender, major (where possible), interests, hobbies, and self-disclosed personality traits (e.g. introvert or extrovert). Beginning with 15 students, the process focused on creating opportunities for mentors and mentees to connect socially. It encouraged the discovery of relationship building skills in a safe environment. Mentors were given funds to creatively help them to spend quality time together with their mentees in exploring the campus community or the local Richmond community. What was discovered was that this type of engagement increased integration into the larger community because students reported that it created a sense of familiarity and belonging. By exploring the opportunities offered by the institution and the city of Richmond together, the bonding between the two students took place, and it increased the comfort level of students matriculating from across the United States and the world as they became familiar with their new surroundings, the support offered by the university, and the entertainment offered on campus and locally.

Extending Leadership Opportunities

To develop new leaders in the campus community, the students had to derive a sense of ownership or investment in the activities. So as the number of students in the program grew, the structure of the program continued to develop. Mentors volunteered to be Co-Chairs—student leaders who collaborated among themselves and with staff to plan and execute group events. Another challenge was the continuing growth of the population of the program due to its populari-

![Figure 1](image-url)
Upon the recommendation of some of the Co-Chairs to the Director in 2002, the large group was broken down into family groups forever to be known as “Family Clusters.” The concept of Family Clusters enabled participants to connect and bond on a smaller scale within the larger framework of PAM. A Co-Chair led each Family Cluster and was assisted by a Family Cluster Co-Chair to share the responsibility of the event planning and communications. Family Cluster Co-Chairs became responsible primarily for planning one Family Cluster event per semester. This offered more opportunities for PAM members to have leadership experience and to network with their peers. It would also prove very beneficial for communication purposes as the program participants continued to grow, doubling in 2005 and then again in 2011.

**Sophomore Slump**

As more and more institutions begin to look beyond first-year retention toward graduation, the second-to-third-year attrition, or “sophomore slump” is being studied and addressed. According to the 2013 Noel-Levitiz Student Retention Indicators Benchmark Report, 16.3% of second-to-third-year students at private institutions are not returning (Noel-Levitiz, 2013). The areas of lowest second-year student satisfaction were “Adequacy of the financial assistance available,” “Frequency of communication with academic advisors,” and “Availability of work experiences associated with student’s career interests” (Noel-Levitiz, 2013). The Noel-Levitiz study noted that many second-year students in their 2013 study were open to outreach. Where institutions might provide opportunities that the second-year students desired most ranged from identifying work experiences to help balancing the demands of school with work and has been outlined in Figure 1.

PAM provides nearly all of the resources that held the lowest satisfaction levels and the opportunities requested by second-year students. PAM counters the effects of the sophomore slump, whether they return their second year as mentors or not. Mentees who do not return as mentors have still made the connections, had the leadership training, the opportunity to get the internship and job information, the benefits of communal networking, and campus connections. They also have had the opportunity to connect with academic skills staff to sign up for peer tutoring for over 170 different courses, academic skills development, and life-skills development (time and stress management).

Beginning in 2013, PAM staff began to address the “Five Opportunities to Help” through hosting the PAM Academic Achievement Brunch. During an event sponsored by a national corporation headquartered locally, the academic achievement of mentors and mentees was celebrated at a very well-attended brunch where students met professionals
from the recruiting arm of the company and university staff from the Office of Alumni and Career Services. They discussed the many internship and summer job opportunities available to students, while the business professionals related stories and advice for students interviewing for internships or jobs.

Finally, the other key indicator was that 25% of students “were unable to affirm that they have made many friends at college and feel at home” (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The past five years of online evaluations, created to capture participants’ satisfaction levels, revealed that 92% percent of the mentees surveyed indicated that they valued their interactions with their advisors/mentors. Evaluations also revealed that mentors and mentees positively connected with one another through group and Family Cluster activities. This is the key focus of the recruitment process and the matching process for mentors and mentees. Students report that this is why they join the program and have felt that they were able to develop through the program. Having personal power in the program also creates a sense of ownership. In the 2011-2012 academic year, Co-Chairs suggested that new leadership be instituted in order to help increase communications; thus, the role of General Manager was created. These student leaders took on the specific requirements of grants awarded by the Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges (VFIC), but they also became the co-planners with the staff to continue to refine the student’s social and community service events from the students’ perspectives. They provided key feedback about events that does not always make it into the evaluations and plays a very important role in organizing events and getting participation in spite of very heavy academic schedules.

Quality of Interactions

It is important for students to interact with a broad range of faculty, staff and students across campus who support their intellectual and social development. Spending key time with their peers in situations that allow them to develop the emotional bonds and the relationships they need with faculty and student development personnel seems to have a very important role on their retention and graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In the 2013 NSSE results, engagement was one of the key factors. Students who were “overall pleased with their campus interactions,” tended to be more successful (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013). PAM participants, measured on the annual assessment, clearly gave a higher rating experience based upon the quality of engagement. They also responded in assessments with excellent levels of satisfaction when meeting professionals or staff from the university.

International Students

In an age where global travel allows for greater numbers of students to study in other countries or to study abroad, the number of internationally born students who study at the University of Richmond has increased significantly as a part of the University’s diversity initiative and global outreach efforts. The change in demographics of institutions of higher education nationwide has created challenges for students who come from very different cultural backgrounds (Fischer, 2012). The PAM program has had excellent success with international students in retaining them and engaging them.

Creating opportunities for international students to bond with students from the United States as well as with other international students has made the program a success in this venture as well. Measures are being put into place to begin to assess what about this model works so successfully, but the anecdotal evidence is clear. The NSSE examined students who were more likely to engage with a greater diversity of students. It identified seniors and “first-year students who participated in a learning community or service-learning, held a formal leadership role, or lived on-campus had more frequent discussions” with peers from diverse backgrounds than those students who did not (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013).

Naturally, PAM incorporates all of these elements. PAM upper-class mentors who are Co-Chairs or General Managers plan two community service projects per year and then engage with the experience intellectually through evaluations. These projects provide the opportunity for leadership and community service in an academic environment. Mentees, who are all first-year students, engage with their mentors in the community service events as well. During the two annual events, they have the opportunity to take leadership roles in engaging with the Richmond area community members that come to the events. In the fall they help local children and their parents celebrate Halloween and autumn through various games and activities. Each spring semester they engage tens of local members of the Boys and Girls Clubs of greater Richmond. They can lead the events, the set-up, or the cleanup. These events are greatly enjoyed by the participants and the community alike.

Graduation Success

Approximately half of all mentees return to become mentors in the PAM program. This excellent rate of return is due to the program’s design and the natural tendency for students to give back when they have received such benefits from participating in the program. The PAM program’s ability to help students integrate into the institution provides them with the opportunity to secure the resources and emotional support they require to graduate. The 2013 Noel-Levitz study shows that college completion effective practices have been determined, and the PAM program assists with incorporating nearly all of these practices. These programs, by design, are the second most effective internal operation of private institutions to graduate their students, because they were designed specifically for first-year students (Noel-Levitz, 2013).
The University of Richmond provides the majority of the other top effective practices that students were intentionally made aware of through the mentoring process. The Chronicle of Higher Education completed a study of four and six-year graduation rates for students across the nation who matriculated in 2004. For private, four-year colleges, the PAM program outpaced all but the top institution, Washington and Lee (92.8%), while it surpassed the second highest achieving institution, the University of Richmond (87.3%) (Chronicle of Higher Education). As can be seen from the chart below, the graduation rates for both mentees and mentors in the program are an outstanding success, averaging 88% for the 4-year graduation rate since 1999-2000 and 92% for the 6-year graduation rate.

Looking Ahead

As institutions of higher education continue to compete for top students, and as more students face greater challenges to staying in college, programs like PAM will continue to flourish because they are effective. Among the findings in a web-based poll of campus officials in 2013, the first-year student programs “…emerged as the top-ranked, most effective strategies and tactics across higher education for improving student retention and college completion rates” (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

The current President of the University of Richmond demonstrated his support of the program in 2009 by increasing the level of funding supplied by the university. These funds were used to increase the number of large-group activities that students could engage in, including the Campfire, BBQ, Community Service events, as well as greater participation in leadership conferences. One of the key components to the success of the PAM program participants is the enhanced leadership skills they acquire not just from participating in leadership roles within the program setting, but through the program’s commitment to providing much of the funding for costs associated with attending National Leadership Conferences. The PAM program provided funds that enabled volunteers to attend a variety of leadership conferences, including the National Black Student Leadership Conference in Raleigh, NC, the East Coast Asian American Student Union in Washington, DC, and the International Student Leadership Conference at James Madison University in Virginia. Other students have received funding to participate in community service projects and even to conduct research. In each of these opportunities, PAM participants submitted applications for funding and, subsequently, submitted short essays, posted on the PAM Leadership Blog http://pam.richmond.edu/, describing how they benefitted from attending these conferences. The essays continue to depict the extraordinary effects that these leadership experi-
ences have upon the students, on their thoughts, and how they will inform their actions regarding leadership on campus.

Since its inception, the PAM program has grown by 87.5% with a total number of 120 students for the 2014-2015 academic year. In preparing for the new year, hundreds of prospective participant applications were read through, debated over, and decided upon. Once matched with their mentors, the connections begin across the summer via email, phone, Facebook, Instagram, Skype, LinkedIn and other social networking platforms. Over the summer, hand-selected, well-experienced mentors communicated with mentees and mentors across the state, nation and even world, ensuring that authentic connections were made to help cement the crucial initial bonds.

On a final note, there has been an exciting development over the summer that demonstrates the University’s continued support of the program. At present the PAM program is budgeted at $12,000. However, the Vice President for Student Development agreed to provide further financial support for the program because of its demonstrated support of the overall objectives of the Student Development Division and the University of Richmond of helping students adjust to the university setting and become active members of the community. These funds are beneficial because the more opportunities for engagement and leadership the students have, the more successfully they will integrate into the university their first year, and the greater the chance will be that they will engage in activities that help them find the growth and satisfaction they need to successfully navigate their first-year and continue on to graduation.
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Coralville, Iowa: Noel-Levitz.

Perspectives on Working with Non-traditional Students

Intuitively, University Admissions and Registrar staff may believe that serving the non-traditional student would be an easier task than working with the traditional, millennial students who approach university education with no background in post-secondary education or any significant life experience to apply to the process. However, intuition is often proven wrong, as discussed in a presentation given on Monday, February 17, 2014 at the SACRAO Regional Conference held in Raleigh, NC. Linda Dammer, Director of Student Affairs, formerly Director of Admissions, and Edward Trombley, Registrar for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Worldwide, discussed these realities in their presentation entitled, “The Challenge of Supporting Adult Learners: The New Traditional Student.” The presenters examined the non-traditional student process, from application through graduation, and shared their experiences with the problems and the pitfalls they have experienced in their University division, which serves a majority non-traditional and military student population.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, the world’s largest, fully accredited university specializing in aviation and aerospace, is a non-profit, independent institution offering more than 70 baccalaureate, master’s and Ph.D. degree programs in its colleges of Arts & Sciences, Aviation, Business, Engineering and Security & Intelligence. Embry-Riddle educates students at residential campuses in Daytona Beach, Fla., and Prescott, Ariz., through the Worldwide Campus with more than 150 locations in the United States, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, and through online programs. The university is a major research center, seeking solutions to real-world problems in partnership with the aerospace industry, other universities and government agencies. Linda and Ed work with the students of the Worldwide division, which averages 25,000 active students, primarily non-traditional, in any given term.

Non-traditional students generally have experience both in life and in other institutions of higher learning, and that indeed is supposed to be their advantage. The familiarity with university rules and policies should assist in helping these students to navigate the process, and their experience in the workplace should give them background in completing applications, articulating their life and career goals, and meeting deadlines. However, it seems that the life-lessons brought to the table by non-traditional students are often forgotten, and this becomes clear right from the initial application process of these students. University staff who work with applicants should be prepared for students who do not remember the full extent of their educational background, often to the point that the student cannot articulate fully the schools that they have attended over the past several years. Military students in particular, who take courses throughout their military career and through multiple deployment locations, may not remember and disclose every school at which they completed coursework.

Applicants do not understand the need of the university to have a full educational disclosure, both for making an admission decision, as well as to provide proper transfer credit.
assessment. Some applicants may protest that as they do not want transfer credit from their previous institutions, they should not have to submit transcripts. Previous poor academic experiences, including poor grades, outright failures, low GPAs and the like are similarly dismissed by many applicants, who feel that admission’s officials should disregard their past performance as it was “so long ago,” or because “I was young and unfocused back then.” Explaining the importance of disclosing a full educational history is likely to be an element of the admission’s process for the non-traditional student.

In general, it is good general guidance in the admission’s process to be clear and concise in your application. Review your application with the thought of eliminating as much of the “fine print” as possible and emphasize the information that is most important for the applicant to complete. If working with electronic apps, it is helpful to make key fields mandatory, meaning the student cannot submit the form until the fields have been completed. Put the most crucial information near the beginning of the application, to be reviewed when the candidate is freshest and before “form fatigue” sets in. Do not be afraid to repeat a question in the application, restated in a different way, and include a statement near the signature asking if applicants have answered all questions truthfully and to the best of their ability. Train with your admission’s representatives, counselors and recruiters to assure that any team members who work with prospective adult learners are consistently conveying the same information that the admissions office does regarding how GPAs are calculated, why transcripts are needed, and the like, as non-traditional students are likely to object to inconsistency in requirements during their admission process.

After non-traditional applicants make it through the admission’s process and become students of your university, their needs continue to differ in many ways from the traditional student. Academic advisors, faculty members and registrar’s office personnel are likely to encounter questions and objections that include or begin with:

- I’m over 40/50/60 years old; why do I have to ________?
- I am an adult...
- My instructor is a kid (or is the same age as my kid)!
- What is plagiarism?
- I paid for this course...
- Nobody told me __________.
- What is APA format?
- I was on vacation/travelling for business, so I should be excused from my test/paper/classwork.

While all of these standard questions and objections may be legitimate, in the sense that they are true for the student in question, non-traditional students have to be coached to realize that obstacles for successful course completion in their lives are not sufficient to excuse them from the expectations of their courses. While non-traditional students do have valuable life and career experience to bring to the classroom, and while that may prove invaluable in making the most of their educational opportunities, it does not exempt them from classroom and university policies that govern the entire student population. Universities should anticipate the fact that non-traditional students do have additional circumstances that demand attention in their lives, and this can make retaining these students more challenging.

However, through the admission’s process initially, and continuing throughout academic advising, they should be counseled to anticipate the problems they may face in their educational careers (job demands, daycare, family illness, etc.), and to create back-up plans for each of these circumstances.

Getting through an entire degree program is challenging for students at any point in their lives, and requires sacrifice to accomplish. This should be clearly explained to any incoming student. Resources should be provided online whenever possible, thus allowing access to help at any time, on any given day. Students should be provided with site maps, charts or guides to assist them in finding information they would commonly need from university websites. Keep commonly requested information on primary website screens—do not “bury” it through several levels or links that students would have to “drill down” to find. Acronyms should be avoided; use clear terminology to assist students of all backgrounds to understand your message. Create a “Knowledge Base” in an online setting (Emory-Riddle Worldwide uses their intra-net), where frequently asked questions can be posted with links to forms and answers to these questions. Of course, making advising help available is also critical, and returning emails and phone calls in a timely manner is not just good service, but also helps to keep students engaged in their educational process.

Emory-Riddle realizes that the non-traditional student population, both military and non-military, will face outside demands during their enrollment, and has developed many policies to assist students in meeting these challenges, and still remain in compliance with University regulations. The Worldwide division offers shorter term lengths, generally nine weeks, allowing students to complete classes more quickly and balance with their work and home schedules. Worldwide offers 12 terms per year at the undergraduate level and five terms per year at the graduate level. Full- and part-time status is redefined to accommodate the shorter terms; students generally take one or two classes per term in the nine-week sessions.

In many universities, if a student does not take classes in any given term, they must formally withdraw and then re-apply or go through a “re-admit” process of some sort. Emory-Riddle maintains a two-year continuing student status policy, meaning that students may take a class any time within two years of completing their last class, and maintain good standing with the University in their initial catalog year curriculum. While we certainly hope that students would not habitually take a class, leave for nearly two years, and then resume, the fact that they can do so on occasion.
allows them flexibility to accommodate changes in job, work schedule or military assignment.

This two-year continuing student status “window” allows our students to move in and out of enrollment, without penalty, as their professional and personal careers dictate. Programs are generally designed to be non-cohort, so students moving in and out of programs do not face the loss of an established peer group. The University offers courses in multiple learning modalities, allowing students who may have started their career at one of our residential campuses to move, via an intra-university transfer process, to a Worldwide campus or online should their location or availability to participate in classroom classes change.

Graduation processes have been adapted at Worldwide to accommodate the needs of the non-traditional student. As the Worldwide division is made up of more than 150 learning sites, campuses and military learning centers throughout the United States and around the world, multiple graduation ceremonies are held throughout the year. One centralized ceremony is held in Daytona Beach, where Worldwide headquarters is located, and this is the primary ceremony of the year. Held on the Daytona Beach residential campus, it allows students who, along with their families and friends, wish to participate in a “traditional” college graduation to do so. Held once per year in May, the ceremony is open to any graduate that had completed a degree program during the previous year. Several ceremonies are also held at venues geographically dispersed throughout the country and in Europe, as well as at military base locations, who host “recognition ceremonies.” This schedule allows as many grads as possible to participate in a graduation ceremony in their area.

Graduation processing of Worldwide students is centralized at headquarters, and we confer every week. Diplomas are printed in-house, so students may receive their diploma very quickly after they are conferred, and can begin to capitalize upon their new status as degree-holders. This is a great advantage to non-traditional students, who are often seeking continuing education to facilitate new employment, promotion or military advancement. Embry-Riddle’s residential campus locations, like most universities, confer twice per year, in May and December, often delaying students from taking advantage of their degree status for several months.

To meet the demands of our dispersed model and the needs of non-traditional students, Embry-Riddle, Worldwide has recently launched a centralized Student Affairs department. Responsibilities that fall under this department cover a wide range of student centric support services to include maintaining the student complaint/grievance repository, retention efforts, at-risk students, honor society, felonies, internship/co-op contacts, career services, disability services, student ombudsman, orientation as well as offering guidance and assistance to staff and faculty in their support of students. In essence, the department serves as a one-stop shop for students with who need assistance in these areas. Academic advising for online students is centralized at Worldwide headquarters in Daytona Beach, but to best serve the scheduling needs of the students at the campuses and military sites, decentralized advising is provided.

Perhaps the single most advantageous tool that Embry-Riddle, Worldwide utilizes to facilitate the efficient transfer and tracking of student information is the University imaging system. This system of imaging stations at our campus locations, and the elaborate system of workflows that these documents feed back into allow for rapid submission of student documents, and enables faster admissions decisions, credit evaluations and the like. Non-traditional students often maintain a “customer” sensibility when working with prospective universities, and while that cannot be encouraged in all situations, from applicants who credit shop from school to school through the timely processing of graduates, the customer service experience provided by a university will be a determining factor as to whether a positive alumni ambassador leaves your doors, or an unhappy “customer.”

Non-traditional students are less tolerant of poor customer service experiences, as many of them have worked in industries where they were not allowed to provide poor service themselves. Expectations may be very high in many cases, often unrealistically so. To best serve this population, it benefits a university to consider not only the message they hope to deliver, but also the manner and mentality of those who deliver it.

Non-traditional students can be very vocal when expressing their displeasure with things with which they do not agree, such as policies, instructors, course content, amount of work required in courses, grading, costs, group projects, turn-around times for receiving feedback or a returned call or email, and adherence to APA standards (formatting, spelling, grammar), to mention but a few. Student discontent can be a sword cutting both ways, as while they try to overcome their own challenges with the educational process, they can create greater challenges for those staff and faculty members who are trying to support them.

At Embry-Riddle, Worldwide, we have found success in helping to alleviate some of these challenges, for both students and staff, by practicing some very basic but trusted techniques: ensuring that policies and instructions are clear written, offering support and information access via a easily navigated student intra-net site, incorporating a centralized grievance process, letting students know who they should contact for what purpose, listening and advising students before they cross a line in violation of the student conduct code, speaking with students firmly, but not condescendingly, and most importantly keeping the channels of communication open by stressing the importance to staff at every level of responding promptly to questions with phone calls and email. ERAU has not mastered all of the challenges we encounter in working with non-traditional students, but through our policies, procedures and our actions, we work to build and improve these relationships every day.
Most institutions have famous, and sometimes infamous, alumni whose student records are readily accessible to staff and faculty across their entire organization. Such access can be too much responsibility for some, and the unintentional (or intentional) unauthorized release can be the stuff of nightmares for most registrars. Texas Tech University is creating a policy and process to handle “high profile” student files to protect the student and the institution from that situation.

The need for a defined policy to provide additional security measures for high profile student files came to light during the transition of one university Registrar to another. A large cardboard box was set upon the new Registrar’s desk, and the statement made, “These are yours now. You don’t want them on the system, keep them locked up.” The box was relocated to a locked closet. The new Registrar, realizing that “the box” would have to someday be addressed, enlisted the help of the Associate Registrar. During a very brief moment of free time, “the box” was brought out and the two administrators sat down to review its contents. Following expressions of shock and dismay, an overwhelming sense of fear, and brief contemplations of to whom custody of “the box” could be transferred, the two determined that there would be no avoiding the responsibility and a need for a policy and process to handle such files definitely existed.

A meeting was called with the institution’s legal representatives, who, once having fully digested the enormity of the information contained in the box, were fully invested in creating a formal process and policy to protect its contents.

Creating such a policy and process required several considerations:

- Purpose and policy for designating files for additional security
- Determination of who should be inducted into the “The Box”
- Degree/nature of security needed (temporary or permanent)
- Identification of current file storage methods (paper, electronic, etc.)

Purpose and Policy: The eventual stated purpose of the policy became, “Document procedures and storage method of student files designated "high profile" due to political, business, social/cultural, or entertainment event or achievement involvement. These files are treated with additional security for the protection of the individual student and the institution.” A file may be designated as “high profile”, upon agreement of the system and institutional legal counsel representatives, and the TTU Registrar and Associate Registrar. The designee’s name will be added to a list and kept on file in each of the aforementioned offices.

High Profile Population Designation: There are many reasons that may merit consideration of induction into “The Box”. All schools have famous alumni whom they are proud to promote as shining examples of how an education at their institution served as the platform for their future success. The list of these names is fairly easy to assemble. Another, albeit less appealing, population are those individuals whose notoriety is such that one would rather not be associated with them. These individuals often have a different following that is seeking information for many reasons, among them fascination and retribution – and neither reason is one the institution wishes to feed. The level of media attention (both local and national) also plays into the consideration of which files may need additional protection. The last and final category currently considered are those students who may have personal security risks beyond their control. Students who have been the victim of crime may

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also merit consideration for their current and future safety. In all cases, the decision to mark a file confidential (regardless of the student’s initial file designation) and pursue a more thorough security process was deemed not only prudent but necessary.

Degree/Nature of Security Needed: It is tempting to allow the possible threat of a security breach to cause one to shut down the entire system to not allow access to anyone for any possible reason. Once one takes a deep breath and realizes that such an approach will not be feasible, the various needs and levels of security can be seen more clearly. The Office of the Registrar divided the population into two groups initially: Former Students and Current Students. Former students seemed to be the easiest to address – their files most often would be designated for additional security on a permanent basis. Their files could be “locked down” and any future access would require direct contact with the Registrar or the Associate Registrar. This group seemed “easy” until further analysis showed having a former student designated for higher security who had become a current employee of the institution created innumerable complications from an IT system standpoint. This group posed the same challenges as those who were current students – their files must be active to allow for current interaction from the student directly with the institution. The approach for this population is much more intricate in nature and one for which TTU does not have a solution. As the need to secure the student record has been determined a primary must, the IT division of the institution continues to research the far-reaching effects of not only how to secure the data, but how to prevent auxiliary systems from accessing that data. To increase the level of complication, it has been determined that there is a need for a temporary file lock down solution. There are feasible situations in which a file should be locked down temporarily, but may not merit a permanent lock-down. These technical requirements made the Office of the Registrar very popular with the Information Systems office.

File Storage Methods: At first glance, file storage methods did not seem to be the biggest challenge facing the Registrar’s office. But a deeper look into not only how files are stored, but more importantly, how they are accessed has created more and more questions and the need for more and more assistance from information technology resources. Files that merited protection from the “pre-computer era” are the easiest to secure. Those files were essentially those located within “The Box”. They were already off the system. The scanned file storage system was easily addressed. The files are printed off and placed in the Box, and a single file is uploaded instructing anyone searching for the file to contact the Registrar. Of greater challenge were those records that existed ONLY on the student information system. Consideration of a pseudonym process was quickly determined to not be effective as at any point that someone accessed the information, they would know the pseudonym that matched the student record. (Remember, this process was deemed necessary mostly to protect the institution from itself.) Research is ongoing to determine an appropriate and feasibly maintained system to address all the data and file storage access complications.

It is an unfortunate reality that there are those whose notoriety will always generate unwanted interest in their background from many unauthorized parties. Our institutions will have individuals who are tricked, or who may be tempted, into participating in an unauthorized release of information. Regardless of the intent of the release, the institution is liable, and that makes consideration of a process for securing high profile files that much more important. “The Box” brought with it not only interesting reading, but an opportunity to review all system processes related to student records and will ultimately result in a better understanding of system file security.
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FUTURE MEETINGS

DATES
February 6-10, 2016
February 10-15, 2017

MEETING
69th Annual Meeting
70th Annual Meeting

LOCATION
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
St. Petersburg Beach, Florida