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STUDENT EMPLOYMENT AND PERSISTENCE

by Douglas McKenzie

University administrators are faced with an increasingly complex dilemma: how to maintain enrollments despite the demographic reality of a shrinking traditional college aged population. Dr. Lee Noel noted in a 1979 address to the National Association of Student Employment Administrator's conference that we learned how to *admit* students in the 60's and we now must learn how to *recruit* students. Once recruited, we must then ensure that they persist until graduation.

To achieve this, universities and colleges must identify institutional characteristics which will both attract and retain students. Previous assumptions about the economic and personal benefits an individual will derive from higher education must now stand stiffer scrutiny. Dr. Noel believes that institutions increasingly will have to demonstrate that they can provide a learning experience that explores an individual's talents. According to the cost benefit theory he described, a student will drop out when education is no longer a major priority in the student's life.

Findings from substantial research completed in the past decade investigating student retention suggest disturbing trends. For example, the drop-out rate for freshmen in four-year public institutions crept up from 32% in 1975 to 34% in 1977. Research has isolated a host of factors influencing retention. One factor, student employment, could have an unexpected yet significant impact on an institution's ability to retain students. If true, school officials may consider giving new emphasis to the administration of student employment programs.

Several new factors will shape decisions made about student retention in general and student employment specifically. First, the post-war baby boom produced a generation which is now moving into its late twenties and early thirties. The succeeding generation has a smaller number of traditional college-aged people. Between 1965 - 1975 the birth rate declined 24%. Only 9% of the United States' population is aged 18 - 22 years. This obviously suggests that the age composition of an institution's student body could alter dramatically in upcoming years if it is to maintain current levels of enrollment. This new population of student probably will express different needs and interests than their predecessors.

Second, the proportion of lower income students is likely to increase in the foreseeable future. Since the previously mentioned decline in the birth rate occurred predominantly in middle and upper income families, low income students might comprise a greater proportion of the college eligible population. This projection takes on new significance when one considers that research has established a direct correlation between parental income and the drop-out rate. The lower the income, the greater the probability of dropping out. Factors affecting the student's likelihood of re-enrolling become more critical.

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Third, new uncertainties are being expressed about the economic value of a college education. A calculation developed by Richard B. Freeman estimates that higher education improved lifetime earning power by 10 - 11% in the 1960's, but that it had shrunk to 7 - 8% in 1977. That calculation has been challenged; nevertheless, the perception that college has a declining financial advantage persists. In conjunction with this idea, Humphrey Doerman points out in his recent book, *Toward Equal Access*, that our society has begun to increase the value placed on certain blue collar jobs for which higher education is not required. In sum, economic advantages no longer offer the unquestioned incentive once presumed.

Finally, several common themes run through the research into the issue of persistence. Dr. Noel summarized them as:

1. Isolation - the feeling of loneliness and depression
2. Academic boredom - the result of uninspired teaching
3. Dissonance - a student's incompatibility with the environment, curriculum, or people
4. Irrelevance - education that is not significant or does not meet a need.

These themes are amplified further by some specific characteristics of students who drop out. Typical indicators include low academic achievement, inadequate financial aid, economic disadvantage, limited aspirations or feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression. These characteristics are common among student and researcher identified factors affecting the decision to drop out.

What does this mean? Clearly, the first step is to "match" the institution and the student as well as possible. Compatible institutional and personal priorities will improve the likelihood of ultimate success. Once matched, the school must provide the support its students need to remain in school.

It is misleading to talk of drop outs as a single group. In a presentation to the 1979 conference of the California Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, Dr. Thomas Wares of American College Testing identified three distinct categories of student attrition. First, natural and unavoidable events such as marriage or family death force some students out of school. A second group he calls "stopouts." These are students who attend school sporadically, the in/out syndrome. The third group are the unnecessary dropouts. This group may leave school for academic, social, or financial reasons. Dr. Wares believes that this group can be most affected by efforts made to keep them in school.

With the analyses of Drs. Noel and Wares in mind, one concludes that student employment might have a surprising affect on student retention. Two studies in particular confirm the potential impact that employment can have on student persistence. First, in a study done by L. Wieker of Nebraska-Wesleyan University, 67% of the freshman in her survey who remained in school stated that student employment was a significant factor in their ultimate persistence. For comparison, 49% remained in school because of scholarships. Conversely, 35% indicated that financial difficulty was a significant factor in deciding to leave. Second, in *Preventing Students From Dropping Out*, Alexander Astin notes that "having a job usually increases the student's chances of finishing college.

If employment is less than full time (under 25 hours per week), the absolute benefits can be substantial: a 10 to 15% decrease in dropout probabilities."

The information presented to this point suggests that an institution may wish to rethink its current student employment program. Further, financial aid officers may consider altering traditional awarding strategies regarding College Work-Study (CWS) eligibility.

Student employment can address two of the four issues listed by Dr. Noel when he summarized factors affecting drop outs. Specifically, part-time employment can meet the student's very human need to belong and to feel important. It can also help to span the gap created by dissonance; that is, initial incompatibility can be broken down if a student finds a circle of people with whom he or she shares common objectives. The sense of belonging is a crucial element in all employment. This may be even more important for a student who feels insecure about his or her participation in the academic community. Given a well-designed work situation and positive reinforcement for a job well done, the student employee will experience a growing sense of self confidence and esteem.

The changing structure of the student body of tomorrow suggests that institutions should review current assumptions about their student bodies. Often the non-traditional student already will have worked at a job and has returned to school with a much better defined set of educational objectives. For these students, higher education is a vehicle to a specific end rather than the "next step after high school". These students will ask, even demand, that institutions provide them with the necessary tools to reach those objectives. Administrators must be prepared to adapt and to design services to meet students' changing needs.

Student employment can be a creative response to some of these expressed needs. Students understand that work experience can be a crucial factor in future career success; prospective employers will ask candidates about verifiable job experience in addition to academic qualifications. A student who has held a job while enrolled in school has substantial advantages over his or her counterpart who did not work.

To respond efficiently to student needs, some campuses are centralizing student employment within one office. This promotes effective use of staff time, simplifies for students and employers the process of obtaining job information, and provides a vehicle to assess accurately both the need for the service and the success of the campus' employment program. The federal government now offers funding for one aspect of this effort through the Job Location and Development program under the auspices of the CWS program. The regulations state that the "purpose of the job location and development program is to expand off-campus job opportunities for students." To encourage campuses to take advantage of this source of support, the regulations allow campuses a remarkable degree of flexibility to design and implement the program. An institution may assign 10% or \$25,000, whichever is less, of its Work-Study allocation to fund the program. In a special Bureau of Student Financial Assistance Bulletin (April 1980), the Office of Education gave some suggestions for how campuses might proceed in utilizing this opportunity. An individual campus needs to define the operational structure of such a project. Depending upon

the source and amount of student employment funds, an institution may decide to establish a separate function or to integrate these responsibilities into an existing office. San Francisco State University, for example, has located its Campus Student Employment Center (CSEC) in the Office of Student Financial Aid. The CSEC grew out of the College Work-Study program and is administered in conjunction with other financial resources available to the student body.

Student employment obviously offers students a valuable source of financial assistance. By centralizing student employment functions, institutions can provide complete information and referral services to assist students. A campus also may wish to coordinate formally non-work-study employment with financial aid processing to "package" more effectively all the resources available to a needy student. An article by Gail Bates in the March 1975 issue of the *Journal of Student Financial Aid* discusses the policy adopted by Stanford University regarding coordination of campus employment with financial aid awards.

Financial aid officers may wish to rethink awarding strategies based upon the evidence of the importance of student employment on persistence. For example, frequently first time students are offered a package which de-emphasizes CWS funding on the assumption that these students are not yet equipped both to work and establish good study habits. However, both Weiker and Astin suggest that a student may gain benefits from employment even in the freshman year. Astin notes the effect of awarding CWS in conjunction with other types of aid. A coordinated campus effort to develop student employment opportunities could dictate adjusting CWS eligibility according to other types of aid received.

Another factor which influences the success of student employment is the emphasis given to quality supervision of student employees. Many student employees have never worked before and develop job habits with the first job they hold. In that context, the supervisor is also a teacher. He/she can guide a new student employee by offering constructive criticism and direction. The job experience developed will serve as a valuable asset when the student applies for positions following graduation. To take full advantage of this process, a campus may need to devise a training program to emphasize the important characteristics associated with supervising students. Berea College in Kentucky has maintained a century-long commitment to the philosophy that labor is an integral part of the educational process. In 1973, Berea established a Work-Study Development Project which focuses particular attention on the unique role supervisors play in the personal development of students in the work setting. In conjunction with this project, it completed an excellent manual for supervisors which defines the key elements of successful teaching/supervision.

Institutions also may wish to consider augmenting full-time staff with student workers and thereby both obtain a less costly source of labor and encourage students to develop good work habits. By and large, student employees earn less than do equivalent staff members and often do not accrue benefits. If an institution were to pursue this avenue, it would require a commitment to quality supervision. Student employees are students first and thus have inherent drawbacks as employees. Consequently, increased reliance on student employees will depend upon managerial flexibility and resourcefulness. One successful

technique is to define discrete "blocks" of responsibility that can be managed by part time employees who would then be accountable for completion of each task. This can provide the employer with a productive employee who in turn feels satisfaction for a job done well. Another strategy is "job sharing" where two or more people take responsibility for a task formerly done by one full-time person. This model has been successfully tested among the professional staff at the University of California, Davis. Staff members are enthusiastic about the benefits for the office and the individuals involved. This strategy requires conscientious people, so careful of participants is important.

These thoughts are intended to spark some ideas about the use of student employment on your campus. Institutions can define the relative importance of student employment on their campuses and then develop appropriate responses to specific needs. Student employment is a potentially powerful tool in the continuing process of meeting students' changing educational and personal needs.

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