Strengths-based Approaches to Adult Learning

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Introduction

There are numerous factors that contribute to student attrition and retention in higher education. Demographics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family background are variables that are often discussed when looking at higher education retention. A few additional crucial factors can impact student retention as well. This literature review looks at more of a strengths-based approach to adult learning and examines how microaffirmations, positive psychology, and mindset work to foster an inclusive, supportive higher education environment. When this positive culture starts at the top (administration, faculty, and staff), it can lead students to feel a stronger sense of belonging and validate their individual experiences, which in turn can impact retention.

Instead of focusing on what went wrong, it is important for university staff and faculty to think about a more affirming approach to working with students. It is helpful to consider what went right and then follow that up with ways to continue improving. Small changes such as how faculty and staff interact with their students (and what they say) can help bring this strengths-based approach to fruition on more college campuses, and in turn providing welcoming spaces where students want to return.

Microaffirmations

Microaggressions have a longer history within the context of higher education. Their more supportive counterpart, microaffirmations, is still relatively new in the educational setting but has just as much weight with more positive outcomes when compared with microaggressions.

Mary Rowe (2008) discusses the idea of microinequities, a concept she describes as “apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be ‘different’”. Microinequities often involve unconscious bias which leads to discrimination.

Through years of research, Rowe (2008) considers the idea of micro-affirmations, the more positive counterpart to microinequities. Microaffirmations are "...tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening" (Rowe, 2008). The article continues to explain the effects of microaffirmations, the ways in which they benefit others, and suggestions on changing behavior. One of Rowe's assumed purposes in writing this article is to point out the inequities and exclusiveness that she experienced. While this research may have stemmed from personal experience, Rowe's points are valid for expanded contexts as well. In 1973, Rowe's work started out helping underrepresented populations (such as people of color, white women, and people with disabilities) at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The concept of microaffirmations helps individuals (particularly underrepresented or marginalized groups) feel more included and valued in numerous ways.

Demetriou and Fisher (2013) discuss how microaffirmations can be applied in an educational context, beyond how they were previously used in occupational environments. The authors branch off of Rowe's earlier work to recommend that instead of microaffirmations serving as just an unintentional notion, they become purposeful and intentional (Demetriou & Fisher, 2013). Academic advising provides a great setting for these conscious microaffirmations because students (ideally) meet with their advisor repeatedly through their time at the institution. Demetriou & Fisher (2013) include five explicit ways academic advisors can appropriately implement micoaffirmations in their work with students. The suggestions include to practice active listening; recognize and validate every student experience; affirm student feelings; help students optimally process academic experiences; reinforce, reward, and suggest healthy student perspectives and behaviors that lead to positive academic outcomes (Demetriou & Fisher, 2013). Microaffirmations that demonstrate inclusion, recognition, and appreciation for students' experiences is very important for campus faculty and staff to remember (Demetriou & Fisher, 2013). While these positive statements can help make a difference, it is important to note that

microaffirmations are not meant to overlook obstacles or avoid difficult topics.

Demetriou and Fisher (2013) also suggest that microaffirmations can help combat the negative effects of microaggressions so that students can feel included and "capable of succeeding". If students feel welcome and capable of succeeding, that can directly impact their desire to stay at the institution, which affects retention.

Positive Psychology

Another important strengths-based approach for adult learners is the practice of positive psychology. Originally introduced by Martin Seligman, positive psychology focuses on capitalizing on strengths. Positive psychology does not see the world through rose-colored glasses, but rather provides opportunities for people to identify and maximize their own potential (Schreiner, 2015).

Bean and Eaton's (2001) research examines various higher education programming aimed at increasing positive psychological outcomes. These positive psychological outcomes also help lead to academic and social integration, two important components of student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2001). The authors examined the effects of approach/avoidance coping strategies, locus of control, and academic and social self-efficacy for service learning, learning communities, freshmen orientation seminars, and mentoring programs (Bean & Eaton, 2001). In addition, Bean & Eaton (2001) provide suggestions for future programming that can help best facilitate social and academic integration. It is imperative that students develop coping skills, ownership over their academics, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control. It is suggested that the combinations of these factors plus a positive mindset towards one's abilities helps with retention efforts (Bean & Eaton, 2001). The authors provide many suggestions for what other departments and programs can incorporate at their own institutions. Before the departments can help foster these crucial positive, supportive environments, it would be beneficial that staff involved have the appropriate training. It would be important to link how microaffirmations

play a role in positive psychological outcomes to make sure applicable staff are informed.

Shushok and Hulme (2006) explain the importance of incorporating positive leaders, pedagogy, and thinking in higher education. Although it is often easier and more common for people to focus on what is wrong or not working, this positive framework provides a different, more impactful learning experience for students (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). When higher education leaders help foster a strengths-based approach for their students, it is likely the learners will reap the benefits. Research notes that the primary goal of higher education is not to just earn a degree, but rather to help students understand how to understand and apply their own strengths (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). Instead of focusing on what is missing, it is important to look at what is working and going well. This mindset switch can impact student retention. Shushok and Hulme's (2006) research ties in with microaffirmations because both ideas highlight the importance of identifying "small wins". For example, when a student emails a professor with a question, including something in the professor's response such as "Good question. Thank you for reaching out" is a microaffirmation that validates and acknowledges the student's efforts. The combination of positive psychology and microaffirmations help contribute to students' sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy. These ideas can be especially powerful when working with students on academic probation (academic standing where a student's cumulative grade point average is below 2.0). One study that implemented a motivational/empowerment model suggests that positive affirmations and building upon strengths impacted the number of students who were able to continue their education at the same institution (Kamphoff, Huston, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). For example, when meeting with a student on academic probation, a campus staff member could say, "Tell me what went well last semester" instead of "Why are you on academic probation?" Perhaps the student's notes were organized or they had strong attendance, so in asking what went well, the student is better able to reflect on their strengths and find those crucial small wins.

Mindset

For over thirty years, Carol Dweck has researched mindset and the ways in which mindset permeates many areas of life such as school, relationships, business, and parenting. She specifically describes two types of mindsets -- fixed and growth. Someone with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence and ability are static, that if one does not have the skill to do a task, they will not be able to learn it. Those with fixed mindsets are more likely to avoid challenges, make mistakes, and try something that may result in failure (Dweck, 2016). An individual with a growth mindset believes that intelligence and ability are dynamic and one can grow and learn from mistakes, challenges, and obstacles (Dweck, 2016). They are more likely to adopt the mantra of "I don't understand this class concept...yet" whereas someone with a fixed mindset would simply leave the statement at "I don't understand this class concept." Dweck examines how mindset relates to learning and success and in recent years, research has continued to examine how non-cognitive factors such as motivation, mindset, and self-efficacy impact student retention, equally if not more so than cognitive factors (Han, Farruggia, & Moss, 2017). Mindset, particularly academic mindset, can be used to collectively describe academic self-efficacy, motivation, and sense of belonging (Han et al., 2017).

In this section of the literature review, the concept of mindset relates to the academic context. Many previous research studies, including Han et al. (2017) acknowledge the importance and impact of self-efficacy on positive academic results. When students are more highly efficacious (believe in their own academic abilities), they are more likely to be retained from their first to second year at the institution (Han et al., 2017). These findings are relevant for campus faculty and staff. As Han et al. (2017) suggests, conversations between advisors and their students can help identify how students are feeling academically at certain points in the semester. These conversations can also point out the

student's mindset. Dweck (2016) discusses the idea of learners versus nonlearners -- learners are those with growth mindset and nonlearners have a fixed mindset. The "nonlearners" are identified as such because they do not want to "expose their deficiencies" and as a result, they skip out on opportunities to advance their skillset or education (Dweck, 2016). When students believe that success is about learning, not earning an A, they provide themselves with more opportunity. Throughout numerous studies and examples, Dweck (2016) explains that people with a growth mindset have a more positive outcome on their task compared with the fixed mindset individuals -- and of course, similar results are found in the academic environment.

It is important to note that some of the previously discussed non-cognitive factors have a different relationship to underrepresented and/or marginalized student populations. It should not be assumed, nor is it accurate to say, that possessing these non-cognitive factors is the only contribution to student retention (Han et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Decades of research, combined with newer concepts, demonstrate that strength-based approaches to learning yield more positive results for the students. And not only do these positive results impact the students, but they are meaningful for higher education institutions as well. Microaffirmations, positive psychology, and mindset are a few of the many non-cognitive factors that affect retention. When institutions provide a welcoming, inclusive environment where students feel heard, validated, and free to make mistakes, students are more likely to feel as though they belong, learn how to maximize their strengths, and want to return to the institution.

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