

Social Supports for Multilingual Students in the University Setting

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Abstract

Research suggests that students' social engagement, both on and off campus, plays a significant role in their academic performance. This research has been conducted in various settings including institutionally provided social programs (Browne, M. N., & Minnick, K. J., 2005), student organizations (Nunan, D., 1992), as well as interpersonal relationships (Cumming, A. H., 2006). These social supports are especially essential for multilingual students who potentially lack some of the interconnecting support networks of students raised in the United States in English speaking households. Despite the established connection between social engagement and academic performance, social programs on campus are often under-utilized. This study found that students participating in the Student Success Program (SSP) at Boise State University ranked the social aspects of the program significantly lower than the academic aspects, in terms of the positive impact on their academic performance. These findings may help to account for the lower utilization of the social support services of the SSP, and potentially, other programs offering social supports across campus.

Introduction

The population of multilingual students in U.S. college campuses has been on the rise for decades. To give an average of the number of these students in U.S. colleges would be deceptive, with some institutions serving only a small percent of multilingual students while others are serving a population of more than 50% who do not speak English as their first language. Across the country, the population of multilingual students in college classrooms is on the rise. These students help to diversify college campuses and bring with them experiences and insights that their monolingual peers may not have developed. Along with these values, multilingual students also bring with them unique learning issues. As college campuses support the varied learning needs of different populations, with such services as math tutoring centers, writing centers, counseling, and a multitude more, both general and specific, they can also provide great supports for multilingual students to help them overcome their unique learning challenges.

Campuses have not been sitting idly on this matter. English language support programs exist in a variety of forms across the nation, from pre-college intensive English programs and English language support classes taken to supplement writing intensive classes during students' regular semesters, to things such as one-on-one tutoring, social groups, student organizations, and other less structured social supports. The issue that is at stake here is not necessarily what is being offered, so much as how students use the supports that are available to them. Research has extensively proved that social engagement is an important factor in academic performance, but attendance of institutionally provided social programs and events remains low. This research seeks to discover why attendance remains low for such programs. This paper will first establish the issues of low attendance at these various programs. Next, it will investigate current literature regarding both social and academic supports provided by institutions to serve their multilingual populations and the effectiveness of those supports to determine the value of these under-attended social programs. Finally, it will share the methodology, results, and conclusions to a research study conducted on student perceptions regarding social support programs in an attempt to discover the reasons for this low attendance. The goal of this study is to provide evidence for the low attendance and participation in social programs despite the value of such programs as noted in the work of many current scholars in the fields of education, sociology, and linguistics, and in turn, it will seek to offer suggestions to directors and staff at programs that provide social support services to increase attendance and use of their programs.

Literature Review

Social engagement

The positive results seen on students' academic performance from social engagement has been established in numerous studies. Studies have been conducted on everything from interpersonal relationships and student-student and student-teacher relationships, to social groups like learning communities, student organizations, fraternities and sororities, volunteer organizations, and social media—Facebook, twitter, MySpace, even online gaming such as World of Warcraft and Second Life. These studies generally lead to the same assessment: “Whether the research is on psychological well-being, physical health, or student success in college, most studies conclude that relationships play an important role in positive life outcomes” (Schreiner, 2010). This paper will be focused primarily on research conducted on institutionally-provided social supports and their links to academic performance.

Language acquisition

Theories of student investment regarding second language acquisition attempt to provide a comprehensive theory of social identity “that integrates the language learner and the language learning context” (Norton Peirce, 1995). This theory has been built upon since Norton Peirce first offered it as a response to the theory of student motivation, which ignored the language learning context in favor of looking at the learner as the sole agent of language acquisition. Looking at both the learner and the context in which learning happens is critical in developing support structures that lead to learning and fluency rather than simple translation.

Translation is not necessarily a negative, but setting aside the learning context and looking only at the language learner, the only assessment or measure of success that can be employed is how effectively learners translate, whereas considering the context—assessment can be conducted based upon a multitude of areas which have been shown to lead to true proficiency (Price, 1996).

Common institutionally provided social supports

Many institutions provide their students with various support programs. The most common social support programs on university campuses are living learning communities. These run from rather casual organizations that live in the same dorm and participate in a few events together, to those that have their entire class schedule structured for them. They share the same classes, the same dorms, and they often eat and go on trips together. Such communities have had varied levels of success in improving academic performance.

Universities also provide less structured supports; they encourage student clubs, offer free events, provide conversation groups for multilingual students, and volunteer opportunities, among many others. In between the institution-structured and the student-centered programs are the more specialized programs that often work with specific populations and mix both academic and social supports. These include things such as the various TRiO programs, the College Assistance Migrant Program, community writing programs, and several others. These programs offer a mix of supports from exclusive classes to advising, and they also offer social supports such as group events and parties.

Boise State University's Center for Multicultural and Educational Opportunities hosts the Student Success Program (SSP), one of several TRiO programs on the campus. Since 1984, the SSP has served students with documented disabilities, who were first generation college students, or who were classified as low income. This program is primarily an academic support service. It provides numerous supports such as free tutors, advising, academic skills workshops, and a program specific computer lab. In addition to these services, the SSP also strives to build a community among students and staff. It offers free tickets to cultural events, hosts open houses and provides refreshments at the end of the semester. It also has recently put together a semester orientation for students to meet each other and become more familiar with the program and their peers. These services are generally provided based on the theory of best practice—that is, programs that are successful do these kinds of things; therefore, we should as well. The SSP and programs like it rarely consider the direct impact such events have on their students' academic performance, sometimes going so far as to say it is stress relief, but most often simply seeing it as a nice thing to do a couple times a year. These sorts of events though tend to be the least utilized services that the SSP provides.

Current Research Study

This research study was developed in response to the low attendance of social support programs on university campuses. While many students may find these social programs enjoyable and entertaining, most do not realize the academic benefit that the programs provide, which might account for the low attendance. Therefore, this study was designed to assess student perceptions regarding social support services.

Methodology

Students in the Student Success Program (SSP) at Boise State University were invited to respond to a short survey which had them rank the impact that they felt various aspects of the program had on their academic performance. The SSP was selected for a number of reasons. It has a varied population of both linguistic minority students—those who speak a language other than English in their homes—and linguistic majority students. The SSP serves roughly 180 students a semester and provides a variety of services, both academic services—one-on-one tutoring, academic advising, computer lab access, and academic workshops—and social services—graduation parties, free tickets to cultural events, and local outings as groups. The SSP was used for this study because it is a developed program and students are aware of the available services, which helped limit variables such as students being unfamiliar with the social services provided or not knowing how to access them.

The survey used in this study was developed by the primary and co-researcher based upon other student perception surveys, such as class evaluations. The questions were designed to elicit two key points: how students rank the various SSP services and what aspect of the SSP has the most impact on their academic performance. This second point was targeted using a fill-in-the-blank question to gather a more qualitative response.

Results

The initial response to this survey was limited. The entire population of the Student Success Program, roughly 180 students, was invited to participate via email during the summer semester of 2012. Of those students, 15 responded and 14 completed the entire survey. Four of these participants responded that they speak a language other than English in their home. Students ranked seven different aspects of the program and were allowed to write-in and rank an optional eighth aspect. These services were categorized as academic services, which included one-on-one tutoring, advising, computer lab access, and workshops, and social services, which included free tickets to cultural events, graduation banquets, and semester orientation.

The academic services were ranked by the majority of participants as having significant positive impact or some positive impact. Only two participants selected that they had not used the workshops provided by the SSP, and only one hadn't used one-on-one tutoring. However, less than half of participants selected the social services as having either significant or some positive impact. While more than half either had not used those services or ranked them as having minor positive impact. Nine participants ranked "other" services, however only five wrote in their responses. These responses can be categorized as primarily social, with answers like "a refuge from stress," "fellowship with others from similar backgrounds," "networking," and "They have faith in you." This suggests two things. First, as it was established in general contexts above, the social support services being offered by the SSP are used much less frequently than the academic supports. Second, even when considering only those who had used social support services, the majority of participants did not note social supports as having any significant impact on their academic performance.

The ranking that participants conducted, though, only assesses surface level considerations. When asked why they would recommend the SSP to new incoming students, participants often pointed to the supportive staff and how the staff positively affects their spirits. This suggests that while participants do not realize that their social engagement on campus has a direct positive correlation with their academic performance, they do still realize the importance of relationships and their emotional states.

In considering participants' written answers, rather than the simple ranking, we can establish that they do in fact value social engagement. They are not, however, linking it to their academic performance in regards to their moods or educational investment.

Conclusion

The importance of social engagement in regards to academic achievement cannot be understated, especially in regards to at risk populations, such as multilingual students. Students who are not engaged socially on campus are less likely to complete their college education. Many students create their own social support networks among friends and peers, student clubs and organization, or class study groups, yet many more seem to view college as they might a job—somewhere they have to show up to, but get to leave as soon as possible. These students lack the social connections that help promote their graduation. It seems clear that students are aware, at least conceptually, of the emotional weight that school places upon them and of the valuable role that their peers and friends have in balancing that weight.

It seems that this emotional weight is obscured and even ignored when compared to a looming mid-term exam or term paper. To better help their students succeed, programs such as the SSP that provide social supports to help lessen the emotional burden on students, need to raise awareness in their students regarding this issue. Often times, such programs appear to be operating under the “best practice” theory—that is, they offer these social supports because other programs offer them. There is little attention paid to the academic value of social services in these programs, and therefore students are likely seeing these services as distractions from their academic endeavors rather than a necessary facet of their academic success.

By first changing the perceptions of staff and faculty in these programs, it is likely a change will happen in student perceptions as well. When programs see themselves as providing free food for their students at the end of the semester, students come for the free food, but when programs see themselves as providing a community of support and a chance for students to set aside, for a moment, their tests and papers and be more than just students fulfilling the requirements of their degrees, the students will likely change their perspectives as well.

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