



Determinants of Student Success

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Context of high attrition in SA higher education

- Massification of student enrolment numbers post democracy
- Universities continue to struggle with higher attrition
- Increase in African student enrolment
- 68% in 2011 to 72% in 2016, In 2016 the remainder of the student enrolment was made up of 6% Coloured students, 5% Indian students, and 16% White students
- African students perform worse than their white counterparts across all fields of study
- Positive gains in terms of African student enrolments appear to have been undermined by retention and throughput rates

Student Success

- Student success concept quite diverse
- Achieving general abilities and critical thinking over a period of time
- holistic phenomenon that comprises various dimensions of personal development and the multiple goals of higher education
- academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes and post-college performance
- Most common definition is completion of the undergraduate degree in expected time

Meritocracy

- Everyday explanation for success is that of a bright, motivated and/or hardworking student
- Student success is seen as her inherent attributes
- Graduating against all odds
- Societal and institutional structures and cultures are overlooked alongside the student's desire, history and so on.
- Meritocracy suggests that success is based on one's talents and abilities and not based on social history, class or wealth

Meritocracy

- The university and curriculum are neutral with little or no bearing on a student's chances of success
- We are able to avoid the challenging task of looking to the ways in which our curricula and pedagogy serve to exclude
- acknowledge the myth of the meritocracy is to accept our complicity in higher education as a social injustice
- student's self-worth is eroded because all failure is understood to emerge from a lack of hard work, talent or intelligence

Academic preparedness

- Students do indeed arrive as individuals with greater or lesser levels of preparedness for higher education
- Key reason for the poor student performance in higher education in South Africa
- Attributed to the inequalities in the schooling system that were created by the apartheid government
- lack of quality education in historically and currently disadvantaged schools has resulted in an extreme version of the articulation gap

Academic preparedness

- transition from a high school environment to a higher education system
- applies particularly to students from less resourced schools, typically rural or township schools
- practices which led to success in school are less useful in a university setting
- Wilson-Strydom makes use of the humpback bridge metaphor

Language

- Language decreases the student's confidence to engage in classroom discussions, ask questions during lectures, and defend and sustain an argument
- students may be unable to critically engage with texts in the medium of instruction at the proficiency level necessary
- mistake to conflate proficiency with language as the medium of instruction with access to the literacy practices of the discipline
- middle class students with strong schooling backgrounds enjoy far greater levels of higher education success *even* where they have low levels of proficiency in the medium of instruction
- learning in one's home language does not overcome the enormous academic difficulties experienced by students from working class backgrounds

Social class

- Practices assumed at university are multiple & complex and not all can be reduced to the notion of school preparedness
- practices expected of first year students are those acquired in a range of social, home and school settings – capital
- E.g. a student from a middle class home who drives a car to university, owns a laptop with WIFI at home, has meals prepared from home and whose parents have attended university.
- student has enormous financial, health, and social network assets
- What is less visible is the extent to which such a student also has access to subtle literacy practices similar to those valued in the higher education sector

Social class

- Academic literacy includes practices such as approaching a text with scepticism, seeing it as legitimate to take a personal position on a text, and so on
- includes the varied ways in which students are expected to 'be' in the classroom – actively involved in constructing their own interpretation of the knowledge
- What counts as acceptable types of claims and valid evidence
- These practices are easier for some to take on than for others, especially when they are never explicitly articulated and are experienced as a set of covert assumptions and expectations.

Social class

- Bourdieu established that working-class students were less successful not because they were less intelligent than the middle-class students, but because the curriculum was “biased in favour of those things with which middle-class students were already ex-curricularly familiar”
- It is this that leads to the correlations between social class and higher education success evident in every country in the world

Social class

- Universities have massified and the study body is no longer homogenous
- Focus has been on the underprepared nature of the student
- Some are asking about the underprepared nature of the universities in dealing with a more diverse student body

Conclusion

- student success should not be seen merely as result of the students' inherent abilities
- the notion of education as a meritocracy allows us to ignore how our practices privilege students who come from middle-class backgrounds
- This absolves the university from reflecting on the extent to which it is a cultural, social and political space of knowledge acquisition which can enable or constrain student agency