

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY AND STUDENT RETENTION

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs offers a perspective on the motivation of college students and provides a rationale for retention programming in institutions of higher learning. The interventions of student affairs staff and faculty members which address the safety needs of students and engage students' sense of purpose tend to reinforce persistence. The result is improved rates of retention. The possible role faculty might play in a "mentor program" is discussed as a model of cooperative endeavor between the teaching faculty and the student affairs staff.

During the last three decades higher education has shifted its emphasis from the educational needs of students selected from a large pool of applicants to the educational needs of diverse, less numerous groups of students. Consequently, there has been a concomitant shift in addressing the problem of attrition. "The issue is . . . what can be modified in the educational process so that these students will be retained?" (Lea, Sedlacek, & Stewart, 1979, p. 2).

In order to begin to halt the flow of students from the ranks of undergraduates, many institutions have undertaken comprehensive studies in an attempt to develop a profile of high-risk students. For example, the results of a study conducted by Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York indicated the following: younger students tend to drop out with greater frequency than mature students; the dropout rate is greater for men than women; students without a career goal drop out more than those with clearly defined objectives; the majority of dropouts (46 percent) left college during the first two semesters of enrollment (Reyes, 1986). These indicators converge with the findings of similar studies completed on other campuses. Indeed, the single most important determinant of college persistence is personal commitment to either an academic or occupational goal (Muskat, 1979).

David S. Crockett, writing in *Reducing the Dropout Rate*, argues that academic advising is an integral part of the higher education process which should ultimately help students maximize educational benefits. In his view increased student retention is an important result of an advising program that enhances the educational process. Students, for example, are able to develop more mature educational/career goals. Moreover, the advising process can strengthen the relationship between academic preparation and the marketplace. Third, advising can assist students attain grade-point averages which reflect their abilities. Finally, effective academic advising tends to support positive perceptions of the advising process as well as the institution. This positive attitude, he notes, can be a strong contributing factor to student persistence (Crockett, 1978). Since no single model of academic advising can be universally successful, Crockett contends that each institution must decide how advising might most appropriately be delivered for its students.

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The action approach to increasing student retention undertaken at Pacific Lutheran University is illustrative of such an academic advising program. It was determined that an office of academic advising be established and publicized. Advising became a contractual obligation for faculty who were to be evaluated on their advising performance. Evaluations of faculty teaching performance were also completed by students with the intent of encouraging faculty improvement. Furthermore, attention was focused on the differing needs and capabilities of lower-division students.

The retention rate of freshmen at Pacific Lutheran did improve from 69 percent during the academic year 1976-77 to 75 percent during 1977-78 (Beal, 1979). Spin-offs from the project were twofold. Participants left the project committed to the concept that better service to students would result in better retention. Also, the experience of working with the project, which involved 65 persons, improved the institutional environment (Beal, 1979).

An advising program designed to increase retention for college and university settings can, then, be fruitful when it contributes to a supportive, caring environment and when there are inherent methods of dealing with the differential growth requirements of students. In this perspective, education may be seen not so much as a unilateral transfer of information and skills, but rather as the management of a dynamic, transformative process in which students are both collaborators and beneficiaries.

Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation is helpful in understanding why such a program can be effective. Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs includes physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization. The theory posits that needs lower in the hierarchy are prepotent relative to needs higher on the scale. Thus, a person suffering extreme deprivation in most areas of life would largely become motivated by the physiological needs rather than any others. In other words, "A person who is lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else" (Maslow, 1970, p. 37).

But even if all of these needs are satisfied, a new discontent and restlessness will begin to manifest itself unless the individual is doing what he or she is fitted for. When a person is true to his or her nature — when a musician plays, an artist paints, or a poet writes — the need for self-actualization is being satisfied.

The topmost portion of the value system of the self-actualized person is entirely unique and idiosyncratic-character-structure-expressive. This must be true by definition, for self-actualization is actualization of a self, and no two selves are altogether alike. There is only one Renoir, one Brahms, one Spinoza (Maslow, 1970, p. 37).

While it is not possible to summarize here all of the qualities of self-actualizing people, it may be noted that the sample group identified by Maslow was primarily intellectual in character and composed of persons who had defined a mission, who felt they were doing something really important to improve the world (Maslow, 1970). As a whole, they were a realistic group unwilling to make great but useless sacrifices, but who might possibly be induced to participate in radical social action. But they also expressed the desirability of enjoying life and having a good time. In a word, they were people who had developed or were developing to the fullness of their capabilities.

To what extent do most college students demonstrate in their own lives the characteristics of self-actualization as Maslow defines it? Specific events and/or memorable accomplishments may point toward the promise of what is to come during the course of unfoldment when the actualization of a young person's potential and uniqueness is apparent. It must be said, however, that virtually all traditional college students live their lives in a deficiency-motivated

way rather than a being-motivated way. **This** is only to be expected inasmuch as **Maslow** himself describes self-actualization "as a development of personality which frees the person from the deficiency problems of youth" and enables that person "to face, endure, and grapple with the 'real' problems of life" (**Maslow**, 1962, p. 109). These problems, according to **Maslow**, include the unavoidable, "existential" problems for which no perfect solution exists.

Therefore, an institution of higher learning which intends to retain as many of its students as possible will be staffed by persons sufficiently devoted to aid and abet the "growthward" needs of their students. Colleges and universities allocate large sums in their budgets to feed and house students as well as provide for their physiological and safety needs. And these expenditures for support services are essential if the "higher" needs of students are to emerge. It is the contention of the writer, however, that teaching faculty have a potentially significant contribution to offer toward fulfilling the deficiency needs of students and, thereby, increasing the rate of retention. Of course, faculty persons **cannot** act as therapists for individual students nor should this be held as an expectation. But, through respect for the desire to know and to understand that is latent within each student, faculty can support the unfoldment of the "higher" needs.

Maslow cautions against overdrawing the contrast between cognitive needs and basic needs inasmuch as they are interrelated rather than sharply separated (**Maslow**, 1970). Yet the cognitive needs are sufficiently well-defined in human beings that it is possible to speak of ". . . a small hierarchy in which the desire to know is prepotent over the desire to understand" (**Maslow**, 1970, p. 50). The need to understand, in other words, emerges as a "higher" need when the need to know is gratified. When students in any type of learning situation experience the delight that accompanies growth, they will, at least in theory, persist to experience more of the same delight.

. . . the gratification of the cognitive impulses is subjectively satisfying and yields end-experiences. Though this aspect of insight and understanding has been neglected in favor of achieved results, learning, etc., it nevertheless remains true that insight is usually a bright, happy, emotional spot in any person's life, perhaps even a high spot in the life span (**Maslow**, 1970, p. 50).

The "achieved results" of which **Maslow** speaks can, however, be attained without engaging the student's sense of purpose in any systematic way. And it would seem that in most institutional settings these "achieved results," while important, are often used to measure the effectiveness of the entire academic enterprise. Learning which occurs under these conditions, however, tends to split off the fulfillment of the cognitive needs from the conative hierarchy.

Such learning is not holistic to the extent that it does not promote the satisfaction of needs of both hierarchies. For example, acquiring knowledge and the techniques for renewing and systematizing it are skills intimately bound up with the basic safety needs. This relationship describes one horizontal linkage between the conative and cognitive hierarchies. Ideally, the cognitive needs of each individual would be addressed on an individual basis. Then the learning that does occur would flow as a natural result from an intention to be responsible for one's own education. **Such** a shift describes the transition from passive to active learning. Active learning, in other words, can occur when the student is released from concern about safety and finds that love and **belongingness** are more delightful than satisfying safety needs.

Such learning does take place in institutional environments and fortunate are the students who experience it. The question arises, then, regarding what can be done to make this holistic mode of learning the norm rather than the exception. For with a deepened sense of purpose follows commitment on the part of students that results in persistent, goal-oriented behavior.

Because individual differences among students upon entrance to college likely contribute to various outcomes, “. . . it may be that the historical concern with informal faculty-student interaction as an important socializing influence during college . . . has focused attention more on a covarying outcome than a significant causal influence in student development” (Iverson, Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1984, p. 135). In other words individual differences may be the causative factors, on the one hand, while, on the other, student-faculty interaction *and* persistence in college are the covarying effects. One of these differences is whether students act from the level of safety needs or from needs for love and belongingness. If they act from the latter, they would tend to spontaneously seek out and welcome interaction with faculty.

Therefore, the present writer would argue that faculty and full-time counseling staff can become effective retention agents if the deficiency needs of students are **forthrightly** addressed and competently assessed. For children and for many college students, safety is a most basic and prepotent need. If adults in authority – instructors and professors in this case – force a choice between safety on the one hand and independence (growth) on the other, the student will almost certainly opt for safety even at the cost of relinquishing movement toward self-actualization.

The alternative is to establish an atmosphere which might be described as supportive, non-threatening, reassuring, and, to whatever degree possible, noncomparing. With permission granted to express neurotic dependency and even hostility, students would predictably tend to move toward other levels in the conative hierarchy and accordingly discover that love and creativeness are yet more delightful.'

In sum, then, a good educator does not knowingly confront a student who exhibits obvious deficiency needs by forcefully tearing away a functional neurotic symptom or by setting up a stress situation which cracks the person's defenses against an insight too painful to accept (Maslow, 1962). The good educator – in this instance, the effective retention agent –

. . . *practices* as if he understood that gentleness, sweetness, respect for fear, understanding of the naturalness of defensive and regressive forces are necessary if growth is not to look like an overwhelming danger instead of a delightful prospect. He implies that he understands that growth can emerge only from safety. He *feels* that if a person's defenses are very rigid this is for a good reason and he is willing to be patient and understanding even though knowing the path in which the child "should" go (Maslow, 1962, p. 51).

Such an orientation toward the higher education process, if taken seriously, would require a shift in attitude on the part of many faculty toward their undergraduate students. It would also necessitate an alteration in the expectations of university administrators generally toward the job performance of certain members of the faculty equipped by training *and/or* temperament to become partners in student development. In the simplest terms, **teaching** faculty would be asked to provide institutional support for students during their quest for self-discovery. It is unreasonable to expect professors who, for example, teach one or more large sections of a required freshman course to befriend each and every student. It is not unreasonable, however, to expect that they will cooperate with student affairs personnel in providing feedback necessary to identify high-risk students during the first weeks of the semester. Student affairs personnel could then perform an in-depth assessment of the stu-

dent and offer full or partial disclosure of this assessment to the faculty person. The faculty person would elect whether to develop a "mentor" relationship with these students. In the mentor relationship faculty would attempt to determine what students require in order to satisfy their safety needs and thereby make possible the eventual gratification of the cognitive impulses. It would be the primary responsibility of student affairs personnel to deepen students' understanding of their sense of purpose.

Understandably, such a proposal would draw swift and sure rejection from faculty oriented **primarily** toward research rather than toward student self-realization. And not all faculty should be expected to participate in such a mentor program, because it would require a minimum number of contact hours with some students beyond the usual time required for academic advising. Such a "significant other," however, could spell the difference between persistence and dropping out.

In response to the criticism that faculty cannot fulfill their professional responsibilities in teaching, research, and community service with an added burden, it may be readily acknowledged that they cannot. Indeed, faculty should be granted the opportunity to specialize in one of these roles while **enjoying** a reward system that considers their personal preferences and skills (McMillen, 1986). Time spent in the mentor program could be recognized as service to the university. Of course, the governing bodies of institutions of higher learning would have to decide for themselves whether the basis for granting tenure might be broadened to include the kind of tutorial work that would become an integral aspect of retention programming.

In this model of cooperative endeavor between teaching faculty and student affairs workers, students could be accorded a consultative role in the decision-making process in keeping with their growth needs. It is, after all, the object of retention programming to enable students to avail themselves of university offerings in pursuit of social growth. When the ties to the institution have been broken through graduation, the student will be equipped with certain skills to facilitate **his/her** own continued development.

The long-range goal of retention programming, therefore, should focus on the well-being of the young person whose future may indeed be strongly influenced by the trust and care — or lack of it — experienced in the higher education setting. In this way the retention goals of the institution can be fulfilled through its commitment to education which speaks to the needs of whole persons.

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Footnotes

¶ **Maslow** does not develop in any detailed fashion what he sees as the relationship between the cognitive and conative hierarchies. Creativeness suggests the facility to engage both left and right brain modes which in turn implies a measure of independence and understanding. These latter attainments would predictably emerge after the needs for safety had been satisfied and after a demand for factual knowledge had been fulfilled. While the hierarchies may be discussed abstractly as discrete domains of human learning, it would be virtually impossible to attempt to separate them as dimensions of concrete, lived existence.