

FRESHMAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHY OTHERS LEAVE

Marlin D. Priddy
Tarleton State University

Introduction

Do freshmen students know more than the faculty and administration about the attrition of their classmates? Are students more perceptive than the stewards of the university? Tarleton State University is a regional four institution traditionally comprised of students from towns and communities with less than 20,000 in population. Tarleton is in the competitive marketplace in recruiting students to its growing campus. Stephenville, Texas is located 65 miles southwest of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Great effort is being exerted in bringing these folks to our school.

Will this changing of recruitment change the climate or the campus environment? It has been mentioned by some faculty members that there is a culture shock moving from an urban setting to the pace of the 7,500-student campus and the 15,450 populated city. The purpose and focus of my dissertation is to interview freshmen students, compile and analyze their responses, and report my findings.

The Process

Under the guidance and supervision of the Provost/Vice-President of Academic Affairs, the Dean of Student Enrollment, the Director of Student Testing, and my graduate committee, I will scour the literature for related research material, develop a student perception inventory, and interview freshmen students at Tarleton State University. This study will be conducted to help give our administration, faculty, staff, and students the information to sort out the differences between “myth” (false perceptions) and “fact” (true or factual perceptions). The university is serious about closing the gap of first semester freshmen so these students will not fall victim of attrition and in a few years will be obtaining their baccalaureate degree.

The Provost, Dr. Gary Peer, sternly said, “Tarleton is poised to bring quality education to students from an assorted background. It is time to revisit and investigate how freshmen perceive the various aspects of Tarleton and assure these students can achieve success in a culture of excellence.” There has been some informal exit surveys/questioning done in the past by the Office of the Registrar. There have been some common responses of 1) “I need to work to help my family”, 2) “It is too expensive for me to go to school now.” It has been determined that the vast majority of students leaving the university during the first year give these as “pat” answers, not conveying the real underlying reasons why they are dropping out.

However, it is suggested by my team of advisors that students tend to open up and give bottom line answers when the information is gathered in an interview of 25 to 35 minutes. Many barriers are dropped when the interviewee feels genuine concern and well being for not only the student but the respect of the students’ opinion as well.

Fact Finding for Agriculture

Not only is the university administration seeking information to help students adjust, but also the College of Agriculture has a strong interest as well. The Department of Agricultural Services and Development is investigating strategies to positively impact prospective students to explore the options in the five different career paths.

Texas is in the midst of an agricultural science teacher shortage. Our department (AS&D) is actively recruiting students to follow the certification track for teaching.

Are the perceptions of incoming and current freshmen changing? What are their needs and demands? Is it possible to modify what we are currently doing to aid these students so they will become a successful graduate? These are questions to ask, explore, and analyze. As our society changes so must we in higher education. We have a different clientele than five or ten years ago and knowing our incoming students is important to our continued success.

Related Studies

Others have looked into the area of perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and motivation of college students. An investigation to determine if there are correlations and similar findings will aid in the preparation of a dissertation covering this matter. A close screening of the PEEK (Perceptions, Expectations, Emotions, and Knowledge about College) survey, CSEQ (College Student Experiences Questionnaire), and the *Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire* (Baker & Siryk, 1989) will be investigated for content and possible use at our university. These instruments and possibly others will yield suitable information to analyze the best method for freshmen perceptions at Tarleton State University.

Sources of Information

During the review of literature, several interesting and hopefully relevant titles have been located using OCLC FirstSearch, EBSCO, and other database search engines. The EducationIndex in OCLC FirstSearch has resulted many closely related topics for the study. More research will be done in the immediate future to formulate and extract the information deemed necessary for accurate findings and reporting.

Summary

Understanding and guidance are important to us in higher education, therefore, determining the needs and perceptions of our students is critical for a healthy department and college. Agriculture is in a stage where the best and brightest should be invited to join in the education of our naive public. Perceptions are not irreversible and can be changed to make a difference in what we see in our students. Gathering good data and being able to determine what can and needs to be done with new students as they undertake post secondary education should be at the top of all of our lists. The viewpoints of our students are changing and so we must adapt to their needs and possibly their desires.

Bibliography

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