The Impact of Faculty and Staff on High-Risk College Student Persistence

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The purpose of this study was to identify the attitudes and behaviors of faculty and staff that impact the success and persistence of high-risk students. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, 62 successful high-risk students from nine different colleges and universities were interviewed and asked to identify and describe someone on campus who had been most influential in their ability to persist. The 54 campus personnel who were identified by these students were interviewed twice to learn what they do to help students succeed and persist. Seven themes on how college personnel positively influence high-risk student success and persistence were identified.

High-risk college students have been the subject of extensive research, most of it focused on the obstacles they face in achieving a college degree. Defined as those students whose academic preparation, prior school performance, or personal characteristics may contribute to academic failure or early departure from college (Choy, 2002), the term high-risk implies that risk level is conceptualized on a continuum rather than as a static quality that a student possesses unequivocally (Pizzolato, 2003). Personal characteristics that may place a student at risk for not succeeding in college are identified as those features that locate the student in a population without a long or necessarily successful history in higher education. Examples of such students include students who are the first in their family to attend postsecondary education or students with low socioeconomic status. Students of color who enter predominantly White institutions also may be high risk because of the challenges they face from marginalization and discrimination (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Torres, 2003).

Despite significant programming efforts to enhance the success of high-risk students, their rates of persistence to graduation continue to lag substantially behind their peers. Only 26.2% of students who take at least one remedial course graduate from college, compared to a 59.4% graduation rate for students who are not required to take any remedial coursework. First-generation students graduate at one-third the rate of students whose parents have college degrees; less than 29% of low-income students graduate, compared to 73% of high-income students and 55% of middle-income students. African American and Latina/o student graduation rates lag 16 to 25 percentage points below the rates of Asian Americans and European Americans (Chen, 2005). Because degree attainment is considered by many to be the definitive measure of student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007), it appears that American higher education has made little progress toward ensuring that the full spectrum of students admitted to college are successful.

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The research on high-risk students has been conducted primarily from a deficit model, with little known about the factors that contribute to their success. The success and retention of high-risk students has been explored from the perspective of their comparative lack of family support (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008), their academic underpreparation (Ishitani, 2006), and their lack of cultural capital (Walpole, 2003). The limited research on factors contributing to the retention of high-risk students has tended to focus on the programs and services designed to assist these students (Colton, Connor, Schultz, & Easter, 1999).

Research on high-risk college students who have succeeded is relatively limited. Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) study of 24 first-generation low-income students defined success as gaining entry to college. They focused primarily on the process by which these students “beat the odds” (p. 61) and were able to go to college. Their primary finding was that 22 of the 24 students interviewed reported that their success was influenced significantly by another person, a “mentor” (p. 65) who intervened in their life at a critical point. These students reported that their mentors imparted hope to them, instilling a belief that they could achieve more than they thought possible. The mentors also enhanced students’ self-confidence in their ability to succeed, stressed the importance of education as the only path to success in life, and found ways to bring the college and the student together so that success was possible.

A similar portrait is painted in a study of 10 economically disadvantaged college students who successfully transferred from open-admissions community colleges to the most selective institutions in America (Pak, Bensimon, Malcolm, Marquez, & Park, 2006, as cited in Bensimon, 2007). Each student spoke at length about faculty or staff members who had given them the confidence to succeed. These institutional agents were described as “inspirational,” “beyond encouraging,” and “challenging but sincerely interested in helping” students succeed (p. 442). The stories the students told were of faculty and staff who gave them a sense of belonging and validated their experience and knowledge, infusing a sense of hope within them along with the confidence to succeed. This validation was a source of support that enabled their success, which Rendón (1994) noted is particularly important for historically underserved students. Bensimon concurred in her assertion that the formation of these supportive relationships is at the heart of successful outcomes for students who have been marginalized historically and educationally.

Although the contribution of faculty and staff relationships to the success and persistence of high-risk students has rarely been studied, it is implicit in Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2004) revision of Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) interactionist model of student departure from college. Tinto’s (1975) initial theory postulated that students’ entry characteristics influenced their initial commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduating, but that students’ academic and social integration while in college influenced their subsequent institutional and goal commitment, which in turn affected their persistence. Braxton et al. (2004) revised this formulation to include, among other things, a more detailed focus on the factors that influence social integration. One of the factors they postulated as a significant influence on social integration is students’ perceptions of the institution’s commitment to student welfare. Manifested as “an institution’s abiding concern for the growth and development of its students,” (p. 22), this commitment to student welfare is reflected in the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators.

Each student interaction with faculty, staff, and administrators shapes the student’s
perceptions of the college or university’s commitment to student welfare (Braxton et al., 2004). When these interactions are positive and rewarding, they lead to increased confidence in the university as an organization (Bean & Eaton, 2000), which in turn bolsters the students’ sense of self-efficacy that they can survive and even thrive within this environment (Braxton et al., 2004). This enhanced sense of self-efficacy leads the student to engage in more interactions and invest greater psychological energy, which increases the likelihood of social integration. The increased social integration affects students’ subsequent commitment to the institution, and the greater the institutional commitment, the greater the likelihood of persistence (Braxton et al., 2004).

Although students’ interactions with faculty have been the focus of considerable study (Kuh & Hu, 2001), none of the studies of student–faculty interaction has targeted high-risk students specifically. Most research on student interactions with faculty has been conducted using large-scale student surveys focused on the frequency, quality, timing, and academic nature of those interactions (Astin, 1993; Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Kuh & Hu; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Although this extensive research has demonstrated the positive effects of student-faculty interaction on students’ learning, integration into the college environment, and subsequent persistence (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Milem & Berger, 1997), the nature of these studies has resulted in a limited understanding of the process by which these relationships develop, and the nature of the faculty-student relationship “as relationship” (Martínez Alemán, 2005, p. 2) remains largely unexplored.

Three additional complexities in the research on student–faculty interaction complicate the picture of its effects, particularly for high-risk students. The first is the low percentage of students who report interacting regularly with faculty (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2006; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). The second complexity is that students who are better prepared academically and who devote more effort to their studies are more likely to initiate such interaction (Kuh & Hu, 2001), whereas high-risk students are least likely to seek out interaction with faculty. Yet high-risk students are the ones most likely to benefit from increased interaction with faculty and are most influenced by the quality of the interaction experience (Lundberg, 2003). Finally, the salutary effects of student-faculty interaction are not experienced by all students, as indicated by Lundberg and Schreiner’s (2004) large-scale study which found that although African American students interacted more frequently with faculty, their satisfaction with the interaction was significantly lower than that of white students who interacted less frequently.

Thus, although student-faculty interaction appears to be an important contributor to student success, the research has not focused on high-risk students, nor have the large-scale surveys allowed an exploration of the nature of student-faculty interactions that are most conducive to student success. Research on the behaviors and attitudes of staff related to student success and retention is even more sparse (Bensimon, 2007). Bensimon underscored this invisibility in the research on student success when she noted “the lack of scholarly and practical attention toward understanding how the practitioner . . . affects how students experience their education” (p. 444).

Thus, the current study attempts to fill an identified gap in the literature on high-risk student persistence. Although studies have identified the obstacles these students face, few studies have targeted successful high-risk
students; even fewer have explored how these students’ interactions with institutional agents potentially contribute to their success. Based on Braxton et al.’s (2004) conceptualization of the ways in which an institution’s commitment to the welfare of its students is conveyed through the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators, and the importance of this concept to students’ social integration, institutional commitment, and persistence, we designed this study to explore specific attitudes and behaviors of institutional agents who were influential in the lives of successful high-risk students. The research question that guided our exploratory qualitative study was “What are the attitudes and behaviors of faculty and staff that contribute to the successful persistence of high-risk students?”

METHOD
Participants

Sixty-two successful high-risk undergraduate students from nine different colleges and universities were interviewed. A purposeful criterion sampling technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was utilized to select students on the basis of the following criteria: (a) they had entered college as high-risk students by virtue of their admission test scores, their conditional admission, their placement in remedial courses, or a designation by their institution as “high risk,” (b) they were at least three semesters into their program, and (c) they had a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher, indicating that they were currently “succeeding” in their college environment. Students who met these criteria for successful high-risk undergraduates were randomly selected from institutional lists obtained from the registrar’s offices, learning centers, or academic advising offices on each campus. They were personally invited to participate in the study by e-mail and telephone. Representing two community colleges, two public universities, and five private colleges and universities, 52% of these students were male and 48% were female; 47% of them were White, 18% were African American, 13% were Hispanic, 10% were international students, and 3% were Asian. Ten of the 62 students were over age 25.

During their interviews, students were asked who on campus had influenced their decision to persist and/or their ability to succeed. Once the student identified the person on campus who had influenced them the most, that person was then interviewed twice. Because eight of the students identified the same faculty or staff member, a total of 54 campus personnel were interviewed; 70% were undergraduate faculty and 30% were staff. Of these 54 campus personnel, 69% were male and 31% were female; 76% were White, 4% were African American, 4% were international, and 1 was multiethnic, a demographic distribution that was generally representative of the campus personnel across these nine institutions. One student who was not able to identify an influential faculty or staff member was eliminated from the study. The two students who initially named more than one person were encouraged to select the person who had been most influential in their success.

Procedure

Data were collected through the use of semistructured interviews conducted by a team of 11 doctoral students. Each high-risk student participated in a 1-hour interview that was audio-taped; each faculty or staff member participated in two interviews, the first of which lasted approximately 30 minutes and the second of which lasted 1 hour. The interview protocol was structured to ensure that all participants were asked the same set of questions, but each interview also allowed some flexibility to explore individual perceptions in
greater depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The student interviews focused on the students’ decision to enroll in college, whether or not they had ever considered dropping out of college, and who on campus had most influenced their ability to succeed and stay in college. They were asked to describe (a) how they met this “influential person,” (b) what role the person played in their life, (c) how often they interacted with him or her, (d) what five words they would use to describe the person, (e) what behaviors or attitudes had impacted the student, and (f) what strengths they perceived in the person. The interview concluded with asking students their plans for the future and a request to describe anything else that would help researchers understand what helps college students stay in school.

The interviews of the faculty and staff focused on their perceptions of the behaviors with which they engaged with students. The faculty and staff were asked to describe themselves and how they made the decision to work on their campus and were told that they had been identified by at least one high-risk student on campus as having made a difference in their ability to succeed and stay in school. We asked the campus personnel if they were aware they had that kind of influence, what was most energizing about their work, and what words their students and colleagues would use to describe them. During the second interview, we asked the faculty and staff participants what strengths they saw in themselves, how they used those strengths in their work with students, and what intentional practices they employed to help students stay in school. We concluded the interviews by asking them what advice they would give other faculty or staff about how to respond to a student who was struggling or considering leaving school and what they thought their institution could do to be of more assistance to high-risk students.

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Patterns and themes were constructed through a content analysis of the transcripts, and codes were developed accordingly (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process yielded 89 codes; some of the codes related to words used to describe the faculty and staff (e.g., encouraging), other codes related to behaviors (e.g., takes time for students) or to the college environment itself and the experiences of the students within that environment (e.g., frequent interaction). Congruent with Morrow’s (2005) suggestions to ensure trustworthiness, the credibility of our interpretation of the data was checked by having 11 doctoral students code 10 interviews each and by having 2 faculty members and a doctoral student code all of the interviews (Morrow). A comparison of these coded transcripts revealed only slight differences in code interpretations. In addition, to increase the transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study, we created an audit trail of the data collection and analyses procedures.

The narratives of both the students and the campus personnel were used to identify students’ perceptions of the behaviors and attitudes of influential personnel, as well as the faculty and staff’s self-perceptions of the behaviors in which they engaged with students. Taken together, these narratives and our interpretation of their collective perceptions led to the identification of seven themes.

**FINDINGS**

In synthesizing the patterns that emerged from the 62 student interviews and 54 interviews of influential faculty and staff, we identified seven themes related to the positive attitudes and behaviors of campus personnel that made a difference in the success and persistence of high-risk students. These themes included (a) a desire to connect with students, (b)
being unaware of their influence on students at critical junctures, (c) wanting to make a difference in students’ lives, (d) possessing a wide variety of personality styles and strengths but being perceived by students as genuine and authentic, (e) being intentional about connecting personally with students, (f) different approaches utilized by faculty compared to staff, and (g) differences in the types of behaviors that community college students reported as fostering their success.

In articulating these themes and patterns, the interviews of the students and the faculty/staff members are woven together.

The Student Connection

Throughout the interviews, we heard the theme of connection. Most successful high-risk students had formed a connection with someone on the campus. The most frequent words used in the student and faculty interviews were those that described people in relationship with one another. For students, words and phrases such as “caring,” “compassionate,” “supportive,” “rapport,” “takes an interest in me,” “helps me,” “makes me feel important,” “respects me,” and “listens to me” permeated their interviews. In the campus personnel interviews, the most frequent theme expressed was student connections: liking students, wanting to spend time with students, supporting students, and, for faculty in particular, interacting with them outside of class. As Levine and Nidiffer (1996) concluded in their study of low-income first-generation students, “it was the human contact that made the difference” (p. 65).

Although the majority (70%) of the campus personnel mentioned by students was faculty, when students described staff members and what made them influential, their statements rarely mentioned the position the person held. The persons with whom these successful high-risk students connected had different personalities, styles, and strengths and held a variety of positions on campus, but what they had in common was their genuine enjoyment of students. One professor seemed at a loss for words when asked to describe what he actually did that formed these connections. His reply was, “I connect with students because I like them. And because I like talking with them!” A professor who teaches history to large class sections shared that it is hard to connect with so many students in a personal way, yet it is important to do so. He makes a point of learning all his students’ names within the first month of class, noting:

Even that small connection is crucial. If I can run into somebody on campus and say, “Hi Steve” or “Hi James,” that is a huge difference than if you have a class where you are 1 in 500 people in the classroom and the professor has no idea who you are. I do care . . . they see me get impassioned about their progress and improvement.

The connections that both faculty and students described occurred in many different settings and took different forms. For some, the connections were solely in class from a professor who called students by name or noticed when a student had missed class. For others, the connections were formed during office hours as a professor helped a student who was struggling academically or was trying to decide on a major. For still others, the connections were outside of class, as professors had students in their homes, went on field trips, encountered them at football games, or said hello as they passed in the hallway. One English professor described her efforts to connect with students: “I try to build relationships with every student that comes into my office. I share some personal past life experiences with a student that helps them to gain respect for themselves and to value the education that they can receive.”
Students reported that they could sense the welcome and approachability in faculty and staff. A junior stated, “I love walking into [the professor’s] office and seeing his smile and warmth . . . to be in his presence and to talk about anything and everything.”

It also was clear that, although faculty in particular desired to connect with every student, they realized this level of connection was not possible. One said:

Being approachable, I think that is important . . . [but] I don't always think it is my job to pursue a relationship with every student in the class because at times that can be intrusive. But to be engaged with them at whatever level they want to be, I think that is a reasonable expectation.

Angels Unaware

Initially, we expected that these successful high-risk students would name faculty or staff with whom they had an ongoing and significant relationship. Although many of the successful high-risk students regularly stopped by offices to ask for help or just to talk, almost one third of the students reported infrequent interaction with the faculty or staff member they named yet insisted that this person had “really made a difference” at a particular moment in time. These moments included when they were considering leaving school, when they were having difficulty in a class, and when they needed advice or assistance. This finding is congruent with Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) conclusion that the timing was at least as important as the behaviors of the influential person and that “the contact had to be made when the student was ready for it” (p. 76). Students spoke of admissions counselors who had helped them in their first few weeks on campus, of professors with whom they had taken one class, and sometimes of one particular conversation that occurred.

Most faculty and staff who were interviewed were pleasantly surprised that they had been named as influential in the lives of successful high-risk students. Rarely did they view themselves as impacting student retention. As one professor said, “Well, I think I have a good relationship with our students. But I would not have thought necessarily that it would have manifested itself in retention.” The individuals in our study were not attempting to be retention agents, nor were they attempting to address an institutional issue; they were simply trying to make an impact on student learning and success.

The Anatomy of Making a Difference

It was clear that these influential faculty and staff approached their work with a sense of mission and calling. Virtually all stated that they wanted to make a difference in students’ lives. One professor asserted, “In the end I know that I am making a difference. In the classroom I call it the light bulb moment. When you look out there and see that someone has seen something for the first time, . . . those are the moments that just make you think, ‘That’s what I’m here for.’”

Whether the person was a tenured faculty member or an inexperienced admissions counselor, these people who had made a difference in students’ lives saw their work with students as an important part of their identity and reported considerable satisfaction in knowing they had made an impact, which is congruent with Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) finding that mentors were consistently characterized by their desire to make a difference in students’ lives. In our study, the participants’ focus was not on their own teaching or administrative work, but on student learning or on the students themselves. A history professor stated,
I really do love these students. . . . I really want them to excel as much as possible . . . it is my responsibility to cause those students to learn. . . . That means I have to do what I can to encourage those students, to help them, to motivate them to learn . . . that changes my worldview entirely.

As a result, this mindset among these campus personnel enabled them to deliver the type of impact that made a difference in students’ lives by being open to what was needed at a particular point in time. This theme supports Braxton et al.’s (2004) construct of “institutional commitment to the welfare of students” (p. 30), at least on an individual level if not pervasively through the institution. Students clearly perceived this commitment and reported that these were faculty and staff who cared about them and wanted them to succeed.

The theme of wanting to make a difference in students’ lives led to a variety of behaviors in which faculty and staff engaged. From the students’ perspective, the behaviors that made the most difference were (a) encouraging, supporting, and believing in them; (b) motivating them and wanting to see them learn; (c) taking time for them, expressing an interest in them, and communicating to them that they are important; (d) relating to them on their level; and (e) pushing them to excel while at the same time helping them to understand difficult concepts. When asked specifically what faculty and staff do that makes a difference, students most often described interactions outside the classroom and particularly highlighted that faculty and staff made time for them and knew them by name. For instance, an African American student at a large public university said of her professional academic advisor: “She, like, remembers me. Wow, she knows me! There are a lot of people here. . . . To know that she’s trying to know my name and not brush me off as another student [is important].”

The encouragement, support, and care experienced by these students were expressed in the communication styles of these faculty and staff. In particular, communicating to the student that they believed in them seemed to be vital to students’ success. One student expressed this theme as she described her cheerleading coach who “believed in me before I believed in myself, like [she] knew I could do something before I knew I could.”

The impact of making time for students permeated the student interviews; it seemed to make a particular difference when it was a faculty member and especially if the person was a department chair or was seen as a very busy person. One student was impressed with a department chair who took time for students: “He takes the time to sit there and talk to the student when he is the head of the department and others are thinking they don’t really have the time to stop and say hello . . . that’s a lot.”

Not only did these faculty and staff express a commitment to students and communicate that they believed in them, but they also listened carefully, with the result that students often learned important lessons about themselves.

You know, what he does more than anything is he listens. I mean he really listens. I was in his office last semester and I was telling him how I was struggling a little. He sat there and listened to what I had to say. He really let me talk myself into doing what I needed to pass. . . . It’s like you know he gives a damn.

Along with listening to students, pushing them to excel and communicating a belief that they can succeed was mentioned by these successful high-risk students as behaviors that made a difference in their ability to stay in school. A community college student described one of his professors as:

pretty good at pushing me and other people too. She always talks about what
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we can do if we keep on it and it doesn't matter where we come from. . . . She makes you look for bigger things in yourself. . . . She makes everybody feel important. She explains things and she cares about what I want to do. . . . But I think her best strength is that she makes you feel good about yourself.

Students repeatedly mentioned an ability to “meet students where they are” and to go to students’ levels of interest and ability in order to bring them to where they needed to be. Students described physics instructors who talked about motorcycles and cars, English instructors who used the issue of the death penalty to help students clarify their writing style, and history professors who came to class dressed as a historical figure. They described some professors as “a little odd” or “creative” in the way they got students to engage in class but emphasized that this captured their attention and helped them learn. These professors were described as “amazing,” with an “uncanny ability to get students to pay attention and come to class.” One student, when asked to describe what it was like sitting in class with an “amazing” professor said:

Gosh, I feel like I’m watching MTV when I listen to [him] teach. I don’t know how to explain it but [he] keeps you awake in the classroom . . . yet is able to . . . master the art of looking at you, listening to you, respecting you, and demanding from you at the same time, you know? And that takes a lot to be able to do, I think.

Authenticity Matters

As mentioned earlier, a wide variety of personality styles and strengths characterized these influential campus personnel. Some described themselves as responsible, consistent, supporting, and helpful, whereas others (faculty in particular) described themselves as “crazy,” enthusiastic, pushy, challenging, and funny. The personality descriptors most often used by students when they were asked to give us five words that portrayed the essence of these influential campus personnel were (a) positive; (b) knowledgeable or intelligent; (c) passionate, energetic, outgoing, or enthusiastic; (d) humorous or fun; and (e) challenging with high expectations. However, the most common themes in the student interviews describing faculty and staff were genuineness and authenticity along with a clear commitment to students; these qualities formed the foundation for the personality descriptors that students used. Students described these campus personnel as “real” and able to identify with or relate to students. For example, one student of color at a private university was greatly impressed with a communications professor who was able to relate to her on her own level:

When he was speaking he started to talk about these examples that were pertaining to me. He used examples like 50 Cent or Beyonce, and I was like, “Oh, you know who that is!” And so after class I went up to him and started talking to him.

Another student at a community college described one of her science professors as standing out because he was “down to earth” and did not emphasize the distance in the roles of professor and student. Students’ perceptions of authenticity also seemed related to the way faculty communicated with them. As one student described his “very intelligent” computer science professor: “When you approach him, he is not in any sense trying to, like, intimidate you. . . . He talks to you like he’s really your friend . . . he knows all you can know but still considers himself just a person.”

A community college music professor recognized that the way he communicated with students was "probably at the core of
everything,” and that it was important for him to be genuine with students:

They see the enjoyment that I get out of teaching them or being in a classroom with them, or outside of the classroom with them. When they see me on campus or they see me off campus somewhere . . . wherever they see me, I’m the same everywhere. I don’t have a certain persona in front of them as a teacher and a different one elsewhere as a community member or whatever . . . that has a lot of impact in terms of giving a little bit of me and they can take something with them and apply it to their lives.

The words faculty and staff used to describe themselves were similar in many ways to the words that students used. Faculty and staff were transparent to students, resulting in a clear congruence between what students perceived and how faculty and staff saw themselves. This congruence is at the heart of genuineness and authenticity and seems likely to influence students’ perceptions of institutional integrity, as well.

The Responsibility to Connect

Throughout the interviews, many faculty articulated that it was their responsibility to connect with students and make an impact on them. Some mentioned specific intentional behaviors they engaged in, such as calling students by name, asking “relentless” questions that drew out students’ learning from within, or requiring students to visit them at least once outside of class, but many were not able to articulate what it was they actually did until the interviewer asked what they would recommend to other faculty and staff who were interested in helping high-risk students succeed. At that point, the specific behaviors became clear: “listen more than you talk—and don’t think you know what the student is going to say,” be intentional in noticing “the little things” about students, put a balance of positive and negative comments on their papers and return them on time, “answer their e-mails and phone calls as soon as you can,” ask about their families, “give them small steps they can take to succeed,” encourage them to get involved on campus, and “make their education connect to who they are as a person.” In many ways their suggestions were not only behavioral, but were indicative of a belief that even high-risk students can succeed:

I seriously believe that the vast majority of students come to college thinking, “I’m going to graduate from here.” And along the way things happen, and you know that vision kind of gets clouded a little bit. So I think what I like to do is remind them and help clarify for them along the way that that is still possible. . . . In my role as advisor, I try to help students create a vision for what their education can be.

Faculty and Staff Differences

Although there were many behaviors and attitudes that effective faculty and staff had in common, some factors were unique to each group. For faculty, these factors included being enthusiastic about teaching, challenging and supporting students, and recognizing that they did not fit the typical faculty mold. Faculty quite often described themselves as “energetic, enthusiastic, or passionate,” yet staff did not describe themselves this way. Faculty uniquely spoke of how rewarding it was when students’ eyes changed and the light went on or how they lived for the “aha moment.” One professor stated, “I walk in front of those students and just to see their eyes, to see their expression and to think that this is a fresh new thing right now—that inspires me.” Another said that what energized him most about teaching was “clearly the students who received the ‘aha’ moments happening and you see the lights go on and there’s signs of intelligent life, you know.”
A surprising finding among faculty was how many of them used some variation of the word “crazy” when they listed words that others (particularly their colleagues) would use to describe them. Through the interviewing process, we discovered that they used the word not as a mental health descriptor, but rather to explain that they did not fit the typical faculty mold and often found themselves taking on more responsibilities and spending more time with students than required by their job descriptions. These faculty knew they were different and seemed to realize that they perceived students more positively and were willing to do whatever it took to help students learn and to meet their needs.

Although there were no factors that were unique only to staff, there were descriptors that occurred with greater frequency than with faculty, particularly as they described themselves. Staff used the words “supportive” and “encouraging” most frequently. The words and phrases used most by students to describe staff who made a difference were “helps me,” “cares about me,” “talks to me,” “knows me by name,” and “is encouraging.” Communicating care and encouragement for the student as an individual seemed to be the important behaviors of effective staff.

Institutional Differences

Our final conclusion is that the type of behaviors and attitudes exhibited by faculty or staff that help high-risk students succeed may differ according to institutional type. Although there were no institutional differences in whether students named faculty or staff as significantly impacting their success, there were qualitative differences in the descriptors students used for influential persons on community college campuses. High-risk students at community colleges spoke uniquely of faculty who respected them, had faith in them, and believed they could succeed, factors which echoed Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) voices of low-income first-generation students who beat the odds. Congruent with Thompson’s (2001) study of community college students, relating to faculty who themselves have struggled and who understand students’ diverse needs and life demands seemed to be important, as was respect for the students and their cultures.

The faculty and staff on community college campuses also were more likely to describe themselves as taking time to explain concepts, giving students positive feedback, conveying confidence in students, and being role models to show students that they could also be successful. As one pointed out:

I think I let them know that they can do it. They can learn and they can be successful. I want to dispel the myth that they may have had in their past that makes them think that they can’t be successful in college.

In contrast, effective faculty and staff on 4-year campuses were more likely to describe themselves as creating a sense of belonging, connecting to students, challenging students, pushing students to learn in new and different ways, and being energetic and enthusiastic in their teaching style. One professor described himself as “wooing students,” and stated that he tries to win students over, while keeping the focus on what is being learned in class:

“I might be in charge but I hope I’m not the focus. I hope the focus is on that idea that you’re trying to communicate . . . the focus is on creating the ‘aha’ moment so the student gets the idea.”

As Lee, Sax, Kim, and Hagedorn (2004) noted in their study of first-generation students with differing levels of parental education, different approaches may be required depending on the background experiences of the student. Conveying a belief in students’ ability
to succeed and respecting the cultures and backgrounds from which they came appeared to be of greater significance for the community college students in our study than we heard from students on 4-year campuses.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study build on the extensive quantitative research on student–faculty interaction by focusing more specifically on the attitudes and behaviors of the faculty and staff who have influenced high-risk students in their ability to succeed and remain enrolled in college. It breaks new ground in two particular areas: (a) an exploration of staff attitudes and behaviors and (b) the impact of faculty and staff attitudes and behaviors on high-risk students who have succeeded.

From the student interviews, the staff who seemed to make the most difference were those with whom the students came into regular contact, such as coaches and professional advisors. Regardless of position, the primary behaviors of staff that were described by students as making a difference were that they cared about students, helped them meet their needs and get their questions answered, knew them by name, encouraged them, and spent time with them. It was clear that these staff were mission-driven individuals whose focus was on the student, rather than on the institution or the demands of their job. They genuinely enjoyed talking and spending time with students and saw that as the highlight of their work.

This finding is congruent with that of Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) study, in which the persons who impacted low-income students’ ability to enter college were those who were able to connect with students when they were ready for it and who were able to provide both hope and help. Each of the mentors in their study believed they could make a difference in the lives of students and knew what type of help the student needed; they were also highly committed to assisting the student. Likewise, we found that the most significant impact reported by high-risk students occurred when faculty and staff saw connecting with students as part of their identity and mission and were willing to invest their time and energy to relate to students authentically when providing the assistance they needed.

The concept of hope and help as the aspects that staff provide adds to the current understanding of the role of student–faculty interactions. High-risk students do not often seek help or take the initiative with faculty (Lundberg, 2003); staff who are alert to the needs of these students and are willing to invest time and energy to help them at a critical point can make a difference in their ability to succeed and persist. Braxton et al.’s (2004) construct of institutional commitment to student welfare, which has a demonstrated relationship to students’ social integration, institutional commitment, and subsequent persistence, includes clearly communicating the high value the institution places on students. The actions of faculty, staff, and administrators speak volumes about this level of value. In Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, and Hartley’s (2008) measure of institutional commitment to student welfare, items assessed the degree to which students perceived that faculty, staff, and administrators were genuinely interested in them, treated them with respect, and had positive interactions with them, along with the institution’s communication of where to go for information about policies. Each of these elements was reflected in the student interviews in our study.

It was evident throughout the interviews that these high-risk students perceived the faculty and staff as institutional agents; that is, they interpreted the care and concern shown for them by these campus personnel
as indicative of the college or university’s commitment to them. Our assertion is that relationships can make a significant difference in students’ ability to succeed and persist. A corollary to this assertion is that students do not stay in or leave institutions as much as they stay in or leave relationships. To the extent that one can understand the quality of students’ relationships with individuals within colleges and universities, it is possible to better understand the dynamics of students’ choices to stay or leave.

Based on the interviews of the faculty and staff who had made a difference in the success and persistence of high-risk students, a clear theme that emerged is that these influential campus personnel saw it as part of their identity and mission to connect with students. Many articulated that it was their responsibility to take the initiative in relating to students. These were people who enjoyed contact with students and wanted to make a difference in students’ lives. This sense of mission regarding student interaction manifested itself differently in each person, but there were four key characteristics the institutional agents shared: (a) a passion for their work and for their students, (b) a desire to impact students, (c) the willingness to invest time and energy with students, and (d) genuine and authentic connections with students.

These four qualities among the institutional agents who impacted successful high-risk students resonate with findings from other studies of persons who influence the success of others. For example, the passion for their work and for their students confirms Collins’s (2001) finding in highly successful organizations that being the “right person” is more a matter of personal traits than particular knowledge or skills. As he noted, these people “loved what they did, largely because they loved who they did it with” (p. 62). Studies of exemplary faculty also highlight passion and enthusiasm for their work and for students, along with an ability to connect with students (Feldman, 1997; Light, 2001; Lowman, 1994; Stephenson, 2001). In Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) study, the passion exhibited by the mentors was based on their belief in education as critical to student success.

The desire to make a difference in students’ lives is congruent with what Levine and Nidiffer (1996) discovered in their interviews of influential mentors of high-risk students; it also underscores Bensimon’s (2007) assertion that effective institutional agents possess “an internal ethical compass to use their expertise for the good of promising students who might otherwise have been overlooked” (p. 443). The willingness to invest time and energy, often beyond what is expected, is an implicit corollary to the desire to make a difference in students’ lives, yet is a theme not previously articulated in other studies of student–faculty interactions or of research on high-risk students. Students in our study seemed to value even small investments of time and energy, particularly when they perceived that the investment was not what other staff or faculty usually did. Taking time for students may be one of the ways that institutional agents can communicate most clearly to students that the institution values them and is committed to their welfare.

The influential institutional agents that were the focus of this study connected with students in a variety of ways across different settings in and out of the classroom, but in ways that were congruent with their identity; their genuineness and authenticity were what shone through to students. Genuineness and authenticity as the basis for connecting with students was highlighted by Chickering and Reisser (1993) as one of the components of positive student–faculty relationships and is reflected in Palmer’s (1998) concepts of identity and integrity as he described good
teaching. He noted that “we teach who we are” (p. 2) and that good teaching comes from both the identity and the integrity of the professor. Palmer (1998) asserted that the very best teachers possess a “capacity for connectedness” (p. 11), and we maintain that this same capacity for connectedness is a hallmark of not only effective faculty, but also the staff who impact high-risk students. The connections these influential personnel had with students cannot be reduced to particular behaviors or techniques, for they were based in the unique expression of the identities of the personnel themselves. As Palmer (1998) noted, these connections are made “not in their methods but in their hearts” (p. 11) and express themselves in “endless varieties, depending on the identity and integrity” of the person (p. 115). These endless varieties are similar to what Levine and Nidiffer (1996) referred to as the “autobiographical approach to mentoring” (p. 136) seen with their low-income students who successfully entered college. Each mentor in their study assisted their students in different ways; “there was no one approach to their work and no general formula about the sequence of actions they took. . . . The mentors sought to copy what had worked in their own lives and to avoid passing on what had not” (p. 136).

If genuineness and authenticity are at the heart of making connections with students in ways that influence their success and persistence, then focusing on the identity and integrity of faculty and staff is as important as examining their skills and credentials. The quality, rather than merely the frequency, of the interactions that faculty and staff have with students is what communicates an institutional commitment to student success. Institutions with retention rates higher than expected are no different from other institutions in the frequency of these interactions but are significantly different in the quality of interactions, which form the supportive campus environment conducive to student engagement and success (Nelson Laird, Chen, & Kuh, 2008). The quality of these interactions reflects the identity and integrity of which Palmer (1998) spoke. He noted that self-knowledge is a foundation for identity and that integrity develops from responding to “the diverse forces that make up my life” (p. 13) in ways that are consistent with one’s values and beliefs. He asserted that, as people learn more about who they are, they are able to act more authentically and consistently and are able to learn techniques that reveal the “personhood from which good teaching comes” (Palmer, 2003, p. 16).

The final finding for successfully impacting high-risk students expands upon the concept of person–environment fit (French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974). Bean and Eaton (2000) and Nora and Cabrera (1996) have articulated the importance of institutional fit in their retention models; Tinto (1993) and those who have revised his theory (Braxton et al., 2004) have highlighted the role academic and social integration plays in students’ departure choices. Our interviews suggest that another element of fit occurs with faculty and staff within institutions as they connect with students. That is, a good fit between the type of faculty and staff within institutions and the type of students enrolled in those institutions is essential. The faculty and staff who are most effective are those who like the type of students who are enrolled there, understand their needs, enjoy relating to them, and are able to respond to their unique situations.

On community college campuses, for example, an important element of a high-quality relationship between a faculty or staff member and a student is respect. This respect seems to fall into two categories: (a) respect for students’ strengths and abilities to learn, to achieve, and to accomplish their goals,
and (b) respect for the life realities that may impact a student’s ability to stay in college: jobs, families, homes, poverty, discrimination, and a multitude of competing priorities. Congruent with Rendón’s (1994) construct of validation, our findings indicate that high-risk students on community college campuses in particular are profoundly impacted by faculty and staff who believe in them and communicate an understanding of their life circumstances. This respect for students, their talents, and life circumstances can motivate students to persist through challenging times. As Engstrom (2008) noted in her study of unprepared students in learning communities within three community colleges in California, “faculty members who knew their students well and served as their ongoing cheerleaders and advocates contributed to students’ increased confidence and motivation to succeed in college” (p. 16). This respect, important for all students, appears to be critical for students in community colleges in particular.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

As with any qualitative study, there are important limitations to the generalizability of these findings to students in other settings. Although the range of settings and the number of students lends considerable support to the findings, the students in the study were not selected in a uniform manner at the nine institutions; they were randomly selected from different lists generated by the campus registrars, learning centers, or advising centers. In addition, the criteria used for defining a student as “high-risk” depended on the institution’s definition. As a result, a high-risk student from a selective public university might be very different from a student identified as high-risk at a community college.

Suggestions for further research include conducting research that compares high-risk students who have succeeded to those who have not, to determine the role of faculty and staff connections more specifically. Another research opportunity would be to conduct a similar study on other student populations to determine if there are unique needs for different student populations. More specifically, research is needed to inform educators’ views about community college students where the ethnic and cultural landscape is becoming increasingly diverse but where there is surprisingly little research about the quality of student-faculty interactions (Pope, 2002).

Implications for Practice

Despite the exploratory nature of this qualitative study, the breadth of the student, faculty, and staff voices represented in the study supports several important implications for hiring practices, the campus climate, and for currently employed faculty and staff. Perhaps the most important implication of these findings is for institutions to review their hiring practices. For positions that directly impact students, often the primary selection factor is a faculty member’s credentials or list of publications; for staff the hiring selection often is based on the particular skills required in the position. Although these skills and credentials are necessary qualifications, the implication from the student interviews is that they are not sufficient qualifications. Institutions must take the next step to hire faculty and staff who display the characteristics that impact students’ ability to succeed and persist. In short, search committees need to explore the ability and desire of candidates to connect authentically with students. Asking candidates what they are passionate about, to define their mission or what attracts them to a college or university setting, or to describe their most recent interactions with students may provide helpful insight into whether or not the candidate can make a difference in students’ lives. Perhaps
requiring letters of reference from students, in addition to letters from previous employers and colleagues, would also provide a glimpse into a candidate’s suitability for a position.

The second implication for practice is directed toward faculty and staff already employed on college and university campuses. Two key themes emerged from these interviews that could positively shape the practices of faculty and staff. One is the recognition that connecting with students makes a difference in their ability to succeed and persist and that this connection is the responsibility of faculty and staff. Colleges and universities can have a significant impact on high-risk students’ success and persistence through creating opportunities for students to experience at least one quality relationship with a staff or faculty member. But ultimately, an institution must have people who are willing and encouraged to do so.

Light (2001) recommended that every student be encouraged to get to know one faculty member each term. This recommendation places the burden on the student to take the initiative and approach the faculty member. Research conducted on both community college campuses and 4-year campuses indicates that most students do not take this initiative. Jaasma and Koper’s (1999) survey of students at multiple 4-year institutions found only 50% of students had ever contacted an instructor outside of class; Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, and Fillpot’s (2000) survey of students on a large urban community college campus found that 75% of the participants agreed that there was very little contact between students and faculty outside the classroom. Only 20% of the students in their sample had spoken with faculty outside of class. Thus an important implication of our research is that the faculty and staff who wish to make a difference with students must be willing to take the initiative with students and invest their time and energy to make those connections.

Because so many of the personnel we interviewed had a strong sense of mission and personal identity regarding the importance of student learning and success, we suggest faculty and staff devote some time to writing a personal mission statement that clearly articulates the difference they seek to make in students’ lives. Once in writing, faculty and staff can examine their daily interactions and behaviors for congruence with this statement. Palmer (1998) referred to this congruence as integrity, and such integrity was the hallmark of the effective faculty and staff in our study. As Palmer (1998) noted, an awareness of one’s gifts and strengths, as well as an acknowledgement of one’s limitations, can lead to a strong sense of identity that becomes the foundation for developing integrity. Therefore, another implication for practice is that faculty and staff develop an awareness of their gifts and strengths and how to apply them in making authentic connections with students.

Conclusion

The faculty and staff we interviewed could be considered “retention agents” in that they made a significant impact on students’ decisions to stay or leave an institution. These educators, whether faculty or staff, formed an influencing relationship with their students that encouraged the students to follow their example, to learn, and to persist. One faculty participant framed it as: “Everyone who is a part of this community has a responsibility to create a climate that all students are going to feel successful in, where all students feel valued and affirmed and validated.”

It is clearly people, rather than programs, services, or institutions, who retain students. The words of one of our first-generation high-risk student participants capture this concept best:

Neither of my parents went to college, so
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when I come home and have all these great stories, they think college is the most amazing thing in your life because all the good outweighs the negative. And that's because of the people I'm surrounded with.

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REFERENCES


