

CHAPTER 12

Cultural Considerations in Postsecondary and Vocational Education: A Discussion on Equity and Accessibility

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the culture of a college in post-secondary education and how the educational institution can affect how others experience it. Specifically, this chapter looks at varying aspects of culture that relate to engagement, instruction, operations, and campus climate. Cultural considerations in post-secondary and vocation education are also discussed in the context of the current issues facing college campuses, with a specific concentration on student retention, online education, instructional practices, funding practices, and the acceptance of people groups. Throughout this chapter, considerations are offered for the institution to determine potential benefits to an institution. It is the choice of the institution to make choices that best fit the needs of its students. Not every choice will benefit every institution as no two institutions are the same. However, there are benefits in education to what others have attempted and learn from past educational experience.

Keywords: Culture, education, vocational education, post-secondary education, climate, education psychology

Introduction

Culture in adult learning environments is crucial to student success (Bruner, 1996). Culture is essentially the mission, vision, and values of the educational organization (Tierney, 1988). Culture differs from the construct of climate. Climate is the *temperature* within the

organization and are based on the perceptions of how the students “experience” the organization. The culture of an organization can affect how others experience that organization. For example, a university may have a culture that does not provide programs that help the student succeed in college. College Atlas (2017) reported that students do not attend college because they feel that “[it] is too hard.” If a college enrolls a student in their university, the next issue is to retain the student until graduation. While some students are ready to succeed at the collegiate level, others are not. Additionally, some may argue that high school students should be ready for college. The fact of the matter is that many are not. Higher education institutions offer programs that help students succeed at the collegiate level. The U.S. Department of Labor is funding opportunities for students to attend college while assisting the student to locate high quality child care (Community College of Aurora, 2017). The students in the program are also shown how to succeed in college, and the college assists the student to find employment after college (A. Johnson, Personal Communication, December 22, 2017). This program, Strengthening Working Families Initiative, is active at Aurora Community College and Denver Community College. Eligibility for this program is any student 17 years or older who possesses a high school diploma or a G.E.D. (or willing to complete a G.E.D.); has an interest in Health Care, Information Technology, or Advanced Manufacturing; and is the custodial parent of a child below the age of 13. These institutions are taking initiative to facilitate student success while in college and even go so far as to maintain contact with the student one year after the program to gauge how the student has acclimated after college.

Many students do not learn adequate study skills, note-taking skills, typing skills, proper sleeping and eating habits, and other behaviors necessary for college success. Thus, a student that enrolls may not succeed in college because of a system that does not provide tools for them

to succeed. However, the student may not necessarily choose to forget school altogether but may choose a school that caters to their individual needs. It is the consideration of an institution to choose the clientele to which they want to accommodate, or accommodate altogether.

This chapter will look at varying aspects of culture that relate to engagement, instruction, operations, and campus climate. The delivery of current issues in college campuses regarding student retention, instructional practices, a case study on funding practices, the acceptance of people groups, and the climate of these groups in terms of acceptance and worth will be investigated.

Fundamental Learning Considerations

The idea of college education has shifted, and educational differentiation is now common or best practice. Generally, differentiation is the attempt to provide equal learning opportunities to students by means of instructional practice. Differentiation and intervention refer not only to educational content and teaching but also the resources that universities offer to ensure individual programmatic success and to foster positive academic culture. There are many reasons for these necessary changes, the principal of which is the requisite to satisfy the need to appease and accept learners of various cultures. Researchers agree that, because people are diverse, there is a necessity to satisfy this diversity (Perez et al., 2012). Ultimately, differentiation and intervention are methods for providing equity and accessibility to students of heterogeneous backgrounds. Bruner (1996) claimed that within every context (i.e., an educational institution) not every system or culture places equal emphasis on identical mechanisms. However, it is relevant for an educational institution to consider the culture and meet the needs of its students *where they are*. The implication is that educating students is only one part of the larger picture.

In education, it is for the institution to allow a student's culture to have unprecedented

freedoms and display relevance to the existing culture of its students (Bruner, 1996). Further, consideration of successful pathways to student job placement and/or career advancement concerns students. Job placement and career advancement certificates can be a key motivational factor to employed students seeking promotion and to students seeking employment directly after college (Walker & Castillo, 2016). Overall, institutional merit and freedom are the reasons that students go to college (NY Times, 2016). Student culture amplifies when these types of opportunities exist for its students. In other words, students (like other clientele of any business) are the best method for recruitment; and if a student tells his or her friends or family members about the positive culture and educational benefits (i.e., assistance with job placement after college), the students will *sell* the university.

Student Engagement Considerations

College Pathways

There are multiple pipelines of educational resources funneled at providing college pathways for students while enrolled in high school. The foci for high school students are to earn college credit while enrolled in high school courses and to graduate with college credit and/or a two-year degree and a high school diploma at the end of high school. Ultimately, the concept for the collaboration is to provide multiple educational conduits for students who wish to enter a specific vocational educational program seamlessly or with little effect on the transition from high school to college. College institutions realize that Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math college “entrants drop out considerably more frequently than four-year college students” (Dougherty, 1992, p. 192). The institutional administrator realizes the impact of low graduation and retention rates (i.e., funding) that necessitate the consideration of multiple pathways for higher education student retention and, ultimately, graduation. The issue is that the number of

total graduates at many universities determines funding from the Department of Higher Education, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Within the vein of vocational education, young men with low-income families are most likely to benefit from these degrees (Reason.TV, 2013). Vocational degrees and certificates, especially because the completion time of many degrees and certificates is one or two years, appeal to various students. Thirty years ago, a person could graduate high school and find a job that could support his or her family. Nowadays, students who graduate from high school cannot generally succeed in the same manner as their parents who may have attended no college and/or started their career right after high school. Most jobs require higher educational training at some degree level.

High School Concurrent Enrollment. At Goal Academy High School, an alternative education blended, online high school throughout Colorado, there is an educational pathway for students to earn college credit while simultaneously enrolled in high school. For students approved to attend, the student will earn high school and college credit for the college courses in which they are concurrently enrolled. Goal Academy HS provides up to \$2,000 per semester per student to take college classes at a university, community college, or a technical school of their choice with whom there is a Memorandum of Understanding. Every state allots a sum of money for every student that enrolls; the allocation of funds is board-approved; and the funds assigned accordingly. Goal Academy provides the funds for students that qualify to enroll in college and earn credits, a vocational certificate, or even an associate's degree. To qualify for concurrent enrollment, students must pass courses with C's or better, score at grade level for Math and Reading on the Star 360 exam, and be a student in good standing.

The U.S. Department of Education (2016) states:

In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama laid out a new vision for America's high schools, proposing funding to scale up innovative high school models and partnerships with colleges and employers so that all students can access a high-quality education and be prepared to pursue their educational and career goals. (para. 2)

Concurrent enrollment opportunities were not available 25 years ago. Now, there is a movement for vocational and high school/post-secondary partnerships, which is hopefully not simply a trend in education but a lasting opportunity for students motivated to earn college credit while earning a high school diploma. The consideration for higher education is to partner with high schools and to provide opportunity to high school students to earn college credit and potentially pursue a college degree at the college or university.

There are No Guarantees. Gardner (2016) indicated, "The Kentucky Community and Technical College system is currently using data gathered from online job listings to develop more programs geared toward getting students ready for the work force" (para. 3). However, the concern is that a college degree is not security for financial success (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). In most work environments, a worker has a specific skill set, and the company with which a student is applying may be searching for a person with a slightly different set of skills. Frankly, just because students apply themselves, it does not ensure employment. Also, many companies are establishing positions within their company in which minority workers are encouraged to apply. A person can be highly qualified; but because of his or her ethnicity, hiring is no guarantee. Companies understand that diversity provides differing perspectives and can facilitate positive organizational and cultural change. While there are no guarantees, the institution can provide opportunity for internship opportunities for students like student teaching for teachers. In student teaching, the student observes and shadows a teacher during their final semesters of

college to learn the day-to-day work.

Learning and Instructional Considerations

Instruction is *where* the culture of a school (mission, vision, and norms) intersects with school climate. Aside from the student, Instructors are the most important factor to learning (Perez, McShannon, & Hynes, 2012). From educational practice, a single conversation with an instructor or facilitator can increase learner efficacy and engagement in classwork. In other words, facilitators have the platform to “move” or motivate students to success (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54). Long (2003) provided seven principles for learner training (pp. 8-9). Within these principles, Long indicated that “they (students) need reinforcement from the facilitator to support them in the early stages of self-directed learning when they may begin to doubt themselves” (p. 9). Discussion on motivation as a critical climate aspect of the culture of an institution is obligatory. Research indicates a positive correlation between instructor support and learner autonomy (Ng & Confessore, 2010). Although motivation is a crucial aspect, learner action and behavior also determine engagement, retention, and graduation.

Online Higher Education. There are many methods by which to engage students in an online university. In recent interviews with the Director for Student Happiness at an online university, the Director indicated that the department made personal phone calls to each online student at least twice per semester and sent weekly emails for school counseling needs. The idea behind these methods is to bridge the *distance gap*, to support the overall mission and vision for the institution, and to mitigate online isolation by providing various selected opportunities to engage with online students. The driving question was: How is it known if the establishments are working? Although this is difficult to measure, the measurement of establishments is akin to graduation and retention rates, job placement, and successes within the specific careers of its

graduates (e.g. promotions, teacher of the year awardees, etc.).

The ability of a higher education institution to provide seamless educational experiences for online students is a daunting task. The example illustrates the efforts of one department to provide support for online students. For post-graduate and doctoral students at this same university, the efforts to bridge the distance gap of online education are explored by a one-week residency during the summer. The required trio of residencies provide the opportunity for students to engage with faculty on a personal level, to provide various workshops for learner improvement in areas such as APA writing that includes a Dissertation “Boot Camp,” to meet and talk with former students that have completed their dissertation, to meet one’s respected cohort, and to continue motivation efforts to students to complete their degrees. Students are encouraged to maintain contact with the respected cohort throughout the year and network with others for common professional interests.

Although each institution implements methodologies in their institution, the primary focus of this university is to develop the *whole* student—academically, socially, ethically, and professionally. This is difficult when coupled with online academics. However, there are great successes in this system for engaging the online student population with success.

Student Isolation. Online isolation is a serious issue in online educational communities. Thus, the educational community is responsible for the successes of its students academically, psychologically, socially, and culturally. Student engagement is a crucial aspect of education. The postsecondary institution thrives to educate and graduate students. Even in higher education, student engagement is an issue and researchers labor to figure out instructional best practices for student retention (for an example see Perez et al., 2012). Although the Perez et al.’s (2012) study focused on instructional practice in a face-to-face learning environment, the implemented

strategies facilitate learning by providing classroom opportunities for students to process the newly learned information, sometimes, by facilitating hands-on opportunities for students to write out the material (i.e., math) or to deliver student-student interaction and collaborative learning assignments or tasks. The results of this study indicated that these instructional strategies provide positive classroom climates and opportunities for facilitation of learning and foster higher grades and retention towards graduation. There are various considerations for student engagement. These methods affect the educational climate of a classroom and student perception of the institution (i.e., learner experience). One way for online educators to promote student collaboration is to assign group projects and group discussions.

As mentioned, online education is more difficult in many ways as opposed to face-to-face instruction. There are considerations for enhancing the online environments such as placing students in cohorts with summer residencies or developing a program that calls students just to “check in.” For student isolation, some universities are making phone calls to students and offering group assignments to facilitate collaboration.

Implications for Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

The ability of a learner to possess self-directed tendencies to learning is a critical factor to learner success, especially in post-secondary educational. The ability for a learner to engage in SDL tasks can promote self-efficacy (Derrick et al., 2005). If the skill for learning can transform for a student, then learning is personal and has the capability for life-changing results. As discussed, with only a high school degree, a learner has limited opportunities for career opportunities.

Resourcefulness, initiative, and persistence are the conative aspects of self-directed learning. Each aspect is a dire attribute for college success. The capability of a student to

complete homework is not the only reason for a learner to learn self-directed qualities. Although “desire is a precursor to intentions” and not always included in discussions on learner autonomy (Derrick & Carr, 2003, p. 6), desire has the potential for upward change based on culture. In other words, desire can change based on the academic culture and the perception of how the learner views himself or herself within the culture.

Ponton (1999) describes initiative as the ability of a learner to create goals with a focus on achievement-orientation and one that actively solves problems with diligence and ambition. Derrick (2000) describes persistence as “the sustained maintenance of persistent behavior that enables the individual to attain the goal” (p. 16). Carr (1999) describes self-control and the association with SDL. The idea is that a learner who possesses self-control will choose education over other activities given the learner has a choice between both activities (Bandura, 1997; as cited in Carr, 1999).

Facilitation of instruction is an assumption of SDL. The belief is that the facilitator provides opportunities for learners to engage in topics that interest the learner and the facilitator promotes those ideas in concert with learner needs to not simply pass the course but to also engage students in deep learning that engages them with the desired outcome of continued study in the field. With this train of thought, there are indeed higher demands on the facilitator. For example, if the facilitator is an expert in self-directed learning and does not have deep knowledge base in the field of e-Learning but the learner wants to focus on the combination of SDL and e-Learning for study, then the learner needs would be best facilitated with expertise in this blend of topics. The needs of the learner require an expert in both topics to facilitate the learning endeavor. Although there are higher expectations from the facilitator, this type of instruction is student-centered and promotes deeper learning.

Learner Autonomy. Learner autonomy is a utility range of dysfunctional learner dependence and dysfunctional learner independence (Confessore & Park, 2004). This spectrum contains learner autonomy. Confessore & Park (2004) characterize dysfunctional learner dependence by “a substantial need for guidance and assistance regarding the learning process” (p. 41). The learner requires much direction with learning tasks. Alternatively, in dysfunctional learner independence the learner does not “accept guidance or assistance” in the learning process (p. 41). Functional learner autonomy is a “range of ability and willingness to participate in selecting and shaping learning projects in which the learner may function independently or in concert with others” (p. 42). Benson (2003) asserted, “Autonomy can be fostered, but not taught” (p. 290). With that, a learner must accept learning not only in content but also in orchestrated contact with others, namely, the facilitator or other learners. Learner autonomy in a vocational setting is the ability of a learner to not just work smart in his or her studies but to also work hard in the chosen field.

Providing learning opportunities where the learner has control over what they learn in a given context is a consideration worth investigation. Research indicates that, when learners have control over what they learn, it develops motivation for learning in the student (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Implications of Experiential Learning

As stated, culture is critical to the learning success of a student. The establishment of a school culture is promulgated by administrative leaders in an organization and enabled through interactions of staff and students. The care with which the culture is established is fundamental to the growth of any program. Because learning is complex, and the end-result of college or vocational education is to find work for its students, experiential learning is a facilitative of the

process of transitioning from school life to work life. In the following case, a community college examined how to better structure *school* to better meet the needs of its students.

The beginning of this process was to examine the culture of the administration and build some of its core leaders (Rosario et al., 2013). Next, through team-building exercises, the team formulated a plan to build experiential learning activities into the plans of study or provide experiential learning opportunities through internships. In some departments, internships were taken as summer courses in which students would attain credit and work experience. On the other hand, if an internship was not part of the plan of study, an internship was still facilitated through the department. Interestingly, these opportunities were offered during a student's first year of college. However, students in the field of education enter their fourth year of college with one year to graduate and earn their degree and this may be their first time to enter a classroom (as part of their student teaching). Then, these future educators begin observations and then student teaching only to discover that teaching is *not what they wanted to do*. Thus, Experiential learning provides opportunity for not only the experience of teaching but will also indicate to the student their interest level in the day-to-day work life of a teacher.

Work Smart, Work Hard. The mantra of higher education has changed. College culture has shifted from the mantra “work smarter, not harder.” Educators and businesspersons from schools and businesses believe in the “work smarter, not harder” slogan. Although there is merit in this saying, others agree that it is critical for college students, especially those in vocational education, to “work smart [and to also], work hard” (Reason.TV, 2013). For vocational education, it is not enough to *just* work smart; but in recent years, students have unfortunately developed a sense of entitlement and are not willing to “put in the work.” The idea of working smart and also working hard challenges the culture in which the world exists by inspiring

students to take risk and channel this risk to career success (Bruner, 1996). In sum, it is not enough that a person is educated in a field where some of the work may be backbreaking, conducted within extreme weather conditions, and/or where a person labors for extended hours. Students that choose these career fields must also have fortitude and endurance. In other words, the work smart and hard is rooted in the field of vocational careers requiring that the student prepare himself or herself for work that is as exhausting physically as it is mentally.

If the student completes their courses of study and practicums and even enrolls himself or herself in a professional organization, the issue that should be on the radar of every administrator in every vocational college is: “When our students graduate, are they ready to start their career?” (Walker & Castillo, 2016). Yes, it is important to address equity and accessibility but not at the expense of the end-result. The question is: Can an institution find suitable employment for its students. As mentioned, the U.S. Department of Labor is investigating whether college programs can better facilitate student success by providing soft-skills training (such as leadership training) and other services to assist students to better manage college. The consideration is to train departmental staff to assist with job placement, to help instructors to provide experiential learning opportunities, and to make a concerted effort to ensure that students can find employment after their tenure at a university.

Cultural Learning Climates

Learning Climates as Learning Cultures

Aside from the classroom, departments, and institution, there are many other factors for consideration. Every aspect of an institution is data that one considers when developing an impression of an educational institution. For example, where one places his or her money determines his or her priorities. If emphasis is placed on recruiting new students every year and

not on retaining the students in the institution, sometimes, a college may not receive funding. Culture is shaped by how an institution approaches people of ethnically diverse backgrounds or accepts alternative lifestyles with which it does not agree.

Funding. A discussion on higher education is not complete without the discussion of funding. Funding is how the university operates and the Board that oversees the college or university determines how funds are distributed throughout the university. Prior to 2010, a university received most of its funding from the State (Woodhouse, 2015). In 2013, more than \$76 billion dollars were spent by the federal government compared to \$73 billion spent by states. “On average, the federal government provided nearly \$2,100 in Pell funding for every full-time-equivalent student in 2013 (Woodhouse, 2015, para. 17). During this same time, there was a 45% increase in higher education enrollment. Interestingly, state funding was affected by the economic crash in 2008 and federal funding was not. During this time, “more low-income students attended college” and the “government increased its Pell Grant support during [the same] time” (Woodhouse, 2016, para. 14).

More specifically related to culture, the New Mexico Higher Education Department implemented a budget strategy to shift focus from attendance and enrollment to graduation. This vision was revised in 2011 for the FY12 budget cycle. Now, “student award” will determine funds allocation instead of student enrollment. In addition, there are five performance measures that aid to determine total funding: total awards (28%), STEMH awards (13.5%), at-risk awards (13.5%), end-of-course student credit hours (25%), and sector mission measures (20%). The simple equation is: Total Funding = Protected Base Funding + Performance Measure. The performance measure is a percentage of the total funding available based on graduation, not enrollment.

In the last few years in New Mexico, there has been an increase in vocational certificate programs because of the funding structure from the state's higher education department. Certificate programs have increased with adding concurrent enrollment and adding programs such as early college high schools. Although these students graduate from high school, there are also students who will earn a two-year college degree in a vocational (STEM & Health) field. When a discussion regarding culture arises, the reader tends to think of student culture. However, culture and accessibility also relate to funding. The funding changes do not necessarily change the culture, but it changes the learner accessibility to college programs if concurrent enrollment programs occurs.

Campus Climate

There are campus climate issues in colleges that affect the overall culture of that college or university. These climate changes affect policy and some functional aspects of a university. As mentioned, climate and culture differ because culture relates to mission and vision; and campus climate is "the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution" (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264). Ward and Zarate (2015,) explained the following dispositions as they pertain to climate:

Demographic characteristics, such as race and gender, and predispositions to certain beliefs or ideals mediate the degree to which higher education can have an effect on student attitudes about diversity. In order to measure the effects of attending college on students' experiences with and perceptions of diversity and diversity related issues, scholars must also account for the ways in which a student's background and past experiences affect how they think about diversity and how they interact with diversity on college campuses. (p. 592)

This opinion about diversity-related issues is cause for major concern, especially when considering racial, gender-based, belief systems issues that affect how one student perceives another student and how the student perceives the university system. The experience of a learner should lead every educational endeavor undertaken by the college or university as positive experiences translate into retention and ultimately graduation from the institution. As it pertains to climate, discussion about race and gender equality is at the forefront of the higher educational institutions in America.

Racial Climate. Racial climate is a powerful motivator for education (Cuellar and Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016). Cuellar and Johnson-Ahorlu (2016) stated, “Campus climate can positively and adversely affect educational outcomes, particularly for students of color” (p. 136). In the past, there have been major concerns with support for white students at two-year colleges and lack of support for students of color at two-year colleges while understanding that community college student populations are more ethnically diverse than four-year universities (for a review see Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016). In their study, Cuellar and Johnson-Ahorlu (2016) investigate the experiences of campus climate at a post-secondary college. The study found that learner experience of negative racial climate is still apparent, even at Hispanic serving institutions. Others believe this will not change until federal policy extinguishes national admissions decisions based on race (Ward & Zarate, 2015).

Continued research on the learner experience of and with the various components of an institution must continue to gain full perspective on students’ perceptions on racial climate. Student concerns require more than just acknowledgement. They require changes within the educational system that provide quality education. From earlier in the chapter, quality education focuses on the *whole student* and not just the academic. Upon leaving an institution, if a student

does not leave better personally, not just academically, then they have only completed a portion of the goals of attending a higher educational institution. Academics are implied in the mandate of an institution. However, developing learners and instilling a successful mentality and facilitating learners to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills are the real issues of educating students.

An understanding that racial diversity is a key aspect of life, a trait that, as implied by Ward and Zarate (2016), is not inherently within the belief system of every person. Thus, as we teach about diversity and racial climates and model positive interaction in a racially heterogeneous institution, the consideration is to develop positive learner attitudes and beliefs that lead to positive learner behaviors.

In one study, at the University of Connecticut, researchers discovered that the six-year graduation rate of African-America males was 55%, compared to 83% of the university (Brown, 2016). University Assistant Professor Erik M. Hines, an African-America male, advised Scholar House. To promote social justice and equity, Scholar House was developed and funded by “the university’s foundation and the Boot Ferris Foundation in the sum of \$300,000 to help create the community” (Brown, 2016, para. 5). The function of the Scholar House was to provide a place and an environment that as one student noted, “[I] can feel comfortable...and discuss [my] struggles with peers who can relate” (Brown, 2016, para. 14). While skeptics of the program feel that Scholar House is segregating students, the program was established to creatively solve an ongoing issue that is prevalent throughout the United States.

Reflection on Culture

Although the mantra of higher education has changed, one thing has not changed in any higher educational institution; culture is still the “chief subject matter of school” (Bruner, 1996,

p. 28). Culture is multifarious and should be the utmost pursuit of any educational institution. Bruner (1996) indicated that the institution should align itself with the student. However, the caution is to disengage from “Supermarket University” (Gardner, 2016). A university is responsible to meet and establish its own culture and maintain its own integrity. These consumer needs, however pertinent, cannot come at the expense of the academic standard of excellence and rigor.

Regarding culture, it is worthy to note that, while culture is chief, every aspect of culture cannot be explained in this chapter. There are entire books dedicated to this topic. The goal is to elaborate on the importance of culture within an institution, how the 21st century educational culture has shifted, and some of the critical issues regarding students in vocational and post-secondary institutions: college pathways, learning implication for self-directed learning and experiential learning, online higher education, and racial and gender climate. These considerations were discussed within the context of addressing the educational implications and considerations.

General Discussion

With the demand for higher education institutions to produce graduates, there has been a culture shift in the number of vocational certificates and programs offered in some institutions. Stakes are high and creative solutions to education is how educators will reform a system that has alienated students since high school (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). It is because of these statistics that institutional change focuses on outcomes (graduates) rather than the source (students). Outcome-focus should be at the front-of-the-mind of every educator at every institution. Moreover, the focus of educators is to graduate and assist students in their educational pursuits.

The ability to change a culture is difficult, but creatively shifting an educational culture toward success, growth, and stability takes time, effort, a clear vision, and good leadership. While good leadership and vision may not be in abundance, this can make difficult and necessary change. This comes in light of the magnitude of diversity at most higher education institutions throughout the United States. The capability for the institution to connect on a cultural (personal) level with a student speaks volume of its ability to understand the population of the learner.

Institutional Effects. One major issue with two-year institutions is graduation rate. In 2015, *Inside Higher Ed* reported that the “six-year graduation rate for all community college students is 39%” (Fain, 2015). Yes, six out of ten community college entrants cannot complete a two-year degree in six years. This is an average of two courses per semester with no courses over the summer. Although not alarming, there are discussions to make higher education free. Although this idea seems like a *good idea*, students who have a financial interest in college tend to complete their degree. While this section may not seem to focus on culture, the concern is that students are involved in a culture outside of the institution that can directly and potentially negatively affect their pursuit of education (i.e., cultural suicide).

Cultural upbringing of an individual plays an important role in education. Because the culture of a learner is as diverse and unique as the individual within the culture and because a society is a major influence of education (Ward & Zarate, 2015), not surprisingly, a student has varying perspectives on education. One point here is that education has transformed into a vending machine to better accommodate student needs. Differentiation is critical. The appeal to attend a university, student enrollment, and graduation rates change how universities receive funding and how the educational community perceives education in general. Catering to student needs is important but not at the expense of the integrity of the university.

Online Learning. There is a stigma for online education and increases with advanced degrees. Some universities do not hire faculty members that have received their doctorate degree at an online university. There are many schools (online and traditional) that lack academic rigor in the postsecondary arena. Moreover, just as online universities lack high academic standards, there are no differences in traditional brick-and-mortar universities. Realistically, any post-secondary university must uniquely appeal to students at some level. Students do not always attend a school because of the mission statement but, rather, because of what the school offers and how school assignments can fit into their schedule.

Carr and Ponton (2003) indicate that “the e-learning environment is not a crippled avenue for the facilitation of learning (as compared to face-to-face environments)” (p. 139). Online learning environments “can be viewed as superior methods for the facilitation of learner autonomy when one considers the potential for learner/facilitator interaction” (Carr & Ponton, 2003, p. 140). One idea of education is to promote efficacy and encourage students to learn and work (problem-solve), and another is to promote authentic learning by facilitating instruction (not teaching content). Facilitation of learning is not a teacher lecture that teaches facts about one subject or another. Facilitation of learning is the instructional method by which an instructor helps the learner to explore his or her interests in a field of study. This method allows for a student-led inquiry and leads to deeper, longer-lasting learning.

Instructor-led inquiry is somewhat of an archaic teaching method. As Ponton and Carr (2003) described, instruction by facilitator positively affects climate by allowing students to learn what interests them. These teaching techniques can improve retention. If a student is generally interested in a topic, he or she will be more willing to explore and even become an expert within that field.

Learner Experience

There is a relatively new line of research that investigates how users experience an organization. Businesses utilize user experience (UX) research to improve how to run their business regarding the experience of the user. Climate of a post-secondary institution is the UX equivalent of how the learner experiences a university. Learner experience research is also relatively new, and there is ample focus in online course design and instructor ratings. However, there is still a need to focus on how a learner experiences the university and how the experiences can benefit the university culture and climate.

The outcome of college entrants should be to graduate and find employment. The success of these students to succeed at a university is the responsibility of the university to provide educational opportunities that facilitate these goals. These opportunities are put into place based on the mission and vision (culture) of the higher educational institution. The success of the student is a combination of events based on how the student responds to college, how the institution responds to the student, and how the interplays of the culture affect the various climates that encompass the environment. Although there are not set criteria for what universities should value, the end-goal is the learner and his or her actual outcome that stems from a desired outcome to graduate with a certificate or degree that potentially leads to their own personal success in life.

Conclusion

There are many considerations for higher education institutions with respect to culture. If a school espouses to the *whole learner* approach, considerations of each aspect of the learner experience is essential. In this chapter, there was discussion on a plethora of topics that relate to equity and accessibility to higher education.

College culture now encompasses high school students who wish to earn college credit while simultaneously enrolled in high school (concurrent or dual enrollment). A discussion on facilitating job placement for students is necessary because there is no guarantee of job placement after college. Further, because of dual enrollment programs, students are entering college with one or two years of college coursework and some earning college degrees by the end of their high school career, a programmatic change that was not available 20 years ago.

Because students spend time and money, investing in themselves, the university consideration for honoring student culture and helping students feel welcome is essential. Students of ethnic or gender minorities are treated with less care than their majority counterparts, even in institutions that claim to focus on the people group of interest (i.e., Hispanic serving institutions).

The mantra of vocational and technical education has changed from the ever-popular work smarter, not harder mentality to work smart, work hard (Reason.TV, 2013). The type of work in vocational fields is just as exhausting physically as it is mentally. Another learning consideration in this chapter examined self-directed learning, learner autonomy, and autonomous learning and the importance of these concepts to learner success. The ability of a learner to exhibit these behaviors (i.e., resourcefulness, persistence, and initiative) promotes learner success. The consideration of the institution is to provide self-directed learning opportunities because of the positive effect on student motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and interest in the topic (Ponton & Carr, 2003).

Other educational models consider experiential learning to promote success by providing internships as part of their plan of study. These opportunities develop hands-on skills for students that they may not get in a traditional classroom. Despite the popularity of online institutions,

there is a stigma for online education. However, Ponton and Carr (2003) described how learners experience facilitation of learning rather than information regurgitation. Deep learning occurs when students learn for themselves and topics that interest them (Ponton & Carr, 2003).

Future Considerations

The LGBTQ Climate. Researchers agree that gender climate is of major concern (Miller, 2014; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Research in this area has increased, especially since federal law legalized gay marriage in 2015. Rankin and Reason (2008) agree that the climate surrounding the LGBTQ community has been “described as chilly or hostile” (Rankin, 2003, as cited in Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 63). Rankin and Reason (2008) demonstrate there is much recoil from the Christian higher educational systems towards the LGBTQ community. The intention is not to advocate for one group or another, but the topic of LGBTQ and organization culture is of relevant and major concern in the early part of the 21st century.

Cultural Suicide. Cultural suicide hinders a person, or a group of persons, from achievement. At a tribal college in southeastern United States, students divulged stories indicating dismissal from their respected tribe for educational pursuit beyond high school. These students faced criticism from parents and friends for *going off to college*. Other students indicated that their Tribes now realize the importance of higher education because many native students that pursue higher education return to their hometowns and utilize their newly learned skill as a contribution (Bruner, 1996). In one example, a student wanted to utilize GPS to land-map his reservation to re-locate overgrown watersheds. Bruner (1996) indicates these *works* are how some “*make a community*” (p. 23). These students, despite cultural adversity, have either learned to manage their anxieties or have developed keen esteem. As Bruner (1996) concluded, viability of a culture depends on its agents to cohere, balance, and gain of realistic proficiency

within the culture.

Final Thought

The learning climate and school culture are not only influenced by the learning that takes place inside a classroom but also by the process of how a college receives external funding and how students are treated by staff members at the institution. Institutional culture (mission, vision, and norms) influence how staff respond to potentially diverse learners. These interactions influence learner experience and ultimately institutional climate. Learner experience can be transformative, either positively or negatively; and it is the consideration of the institution to govern these student experiences.

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Key Terms and Definitions

Climate: “The current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution” (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264).

Culture: The mission, vision, and values of an organization (Tierney, 1988).

Differentiation: The attempt to provide equal learning opportunities to students with instructional practice.

Educational Institution: This term will be used interchangeably with post-secondary education, institution, college, university, or school.

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