

Students' Perception of the Student Support Service: A Pilot Project

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Abstract

In the last two decades, enrollment in Moroccan higher education institutions has increased, and so has the student attrition phenomenon. To retain students until degree completion, the educational reforms carried out since 1999 have encouraged institutions to provide students with support services but have left the implementation of these support policies at the discretion of the institutions. As a result, student tutoring and coaching have become popular in some universities. The purpose of this paper is to investigate these two types of support from the students' perspective and to explore what further support services they need. First, these types of support are described briefly. Second, it is demonstrated through a survey and a pilot project on students' perceptions of the student support services in a higher limited admissions institution that students' needs go beyond academic tutoring. In particular, coaching as psychosocial support is gaining students' attention.

Keywords: tutoring, coaching, student support service, academic support, psychosocial support.

Introduction

University student attrition has been one of the most researched topics in higher education over the last four decades (Bowen et al., 2009; Braxton et al., 2014; Coulon, 2005; Kramer & associates, 2007; Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Because student attrition is a systemic issue that not only affects the student but the whole society and its future competitiveness in the global economy, educators and policymakers have raised the issue of student support as a major and necessary service to enhance student retention at the university (Chaney, 2010; ENQA report, 2007; Grant-Vallone et al., 2003; Walsh et al., 2009; Wilmer,

2008). As a result, multiple services have been devised to help increase student persistence.

For example, besides mentoring and tutoring (Ender & Newton, 2000), higher education institutions in the USA and Europe have deployed the prescriptive advising model, the developmental advising model (Crookston, 1972), the intrusive advising model (Earl, 1987), and the strength-based model (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Additionally, some universities in the last decade have strongly adhered to life coaching as a human developmental support model to help reduce attrition (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Karpinska-Musial, et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, while student support services (SSS) have become an inherent part of student university life in other countries (Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012), Moroccan public universities have not developed a clear, institutionalized student support service policy, despite the education reforms adopted in 1999. In the absence of a defined policy, some institutions have introduced tutoring as a student support service model, and recently, some other institutions have introduced the developmental coaching model in their attempt to enhance student persistence (Mansouri & Mrabet, 2014, p. 548).

First, tutoring and coaching support models are briefly described. Second, the results of a preliminary survey exploring students' perceptions of the support services needed in their institution are discussed. Lastly is a presentation of the findings of the pilot project conducted to explore students' actual difficulties as well as the creation of a Student Support Service Center in a limited admissions (higher) institution.

The Tutoring Support Model

Tutoring is an age-old practice used in contemporary universities as a form of support to students who need specific assistance. It is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon tradition and

grounded in role theory, behaviorist theory, sociolinguistic theory, and the Gestalt theory (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). In education, tutoring is used as a means of action against academic failure and as a means of students' integration into a new academic environment (Ender & Newton, 2000; Evans et al., 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tutoring is also grounded in Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure as one of the keys to retention in higher education. The tutor is an interface between the student and the institution (Danner et al., 1999, p. 247).

Tutoring at the Moroccan university

According to the National Charter for Education and Training (1999), the Education Emergency Program (Programme d'urgence, 2009-2012), and the Strategic Vision (2015-2030), student support services are of paramount importance. These reforms focus on improving students' learning experience by enhancing their level of integration and reinforcing their academic supervision and assistance. However, they do not determine the specific actions to take in order to achieve these objectives.

Consequently, the few institutions that provide support services have adopted tutoring on their own initiative and according to their vision.

Three types of tutoring programs are practiced in various Moroccan institutions: integration tutoring, academic tutoring, and psychosocial tutoring. The goal of integration tutoring is to help freshmen navigate their new environment during the early weeks of studies. Academic tutoring focuses on curriculum content and methodological issues. Psychosocial tutoring aims to help students be aware of their psychological development and their interactions with others in their social environment. Tutoring is provided by volunteer teachers and post-graduate students who know the institution's academic and administrative regulations (see for example Charte du tutorat, 2013).

Tutoring shortcomings

The tutoring support model is not exclusively positive, however. It has severe shortcomings, and the way it is adopted in some university institutions can be more damaging to student persistence than it is helpful. First, if the tutors' support is not grounded in good pedagogical practice or tailored to the needs of the students, tutoring can be frustrating and of little help to students in general and those at risk of attrition in particular. As it is difficult for institutions to always deploy tutors who have mastered the tutees' subject matter, the institution will apply the policy of "anyone will do." Therefore, if tutors are themselves not qualified, they will face the same cognitive challenges their tutees are expecting to overcome (Fantuzzo et al., 1989).

Second, tutoring may help students produce positive academic results and enhance their retention in the short-term, but it may also be destructive to students who have the potential to fall into academic difficulties (Maxwell, 1990). More dangerously, when students develop a dependence upon tutors for their academic success, they become unable to behave and perform as independent learners (Hixon & Sherman, 1988). Thus, not only does tutoring become unethical in that the tutors do the tutees' work for them, but it also deprives students of acquiring the skills they need to develop as independent thinkers and learners (Carlson, 1985).

Third, tutoring requires more than simply knowledge in teaching and learning strategies; it engages both tutor and tutee in a complex relationship. In a project on distance tutoring, the tutors put forward a set of character traits and relational skills as the most crucial factors to be employed in the tutoring practice. The latter require interpersonal skills that are based on neither content nor the tutor's expertise (Hedjerassi, 2004, p. 11). More specifically, tutors need to be trained in question asking, active listening, and communicating to avoid causing damage to students (MacDonald,

1991; Terrion & Leonard, 2007), hence the growing interest of universities in coaching as a human developmental support model in higher education (Bettinger & Baker, 2011).

The Coaching Support Model

Although coaching is a longstanding tradition in the sports and business world, it penetrated the field of education a mere fifteen years ago. It still has no clear status, and it is often used interchangeably with tutoring or teaching (Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Nevertheless, coaching is a unique discipline grounded in the philosophy of discovering people's potential to enhance their performance. It is about helping others to learn rather than teaching them. In higher education settings, the coach helps students discover strategies that may enhance their learning experience. The coach engages the student in an introspection process to help him or her gain a clear vision, define specific goals, and create a plan for the short and long term to achieve these goals (Whitmore, 2010).

When students understand that completing a degree is an essential step in achieving their long-term goals, they become intrinsically motivated and willing to overcome their obstacles (Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 1993; Whitmore, 2010). One of the main strengths of coaching as a student support model is that it does not require the coach to be expert in the subject at hand but in coaching. Therefore, the coach does not need to know about the content of studies as much as he or she should know how to help students improve their life skills and raise their self-awareness to engage consciously in the learning experience until degree completion (Evans et al., 2010; Nieuwerburgh, 2012; Whitmore, 2010).

In the last decade, coaching has expanded in Moroccan society in general and higher education in particular. Teachers in higher education have witnessed the astonishing pace at which coaching has permeated universities during the last five years.

Although the whole discipline is as yet controversial, and coaching is used at university in a way that is contrary to the essence of the discipline, students have proven extremely attracted to and receptive toward such support (Mansouri & Mrabet, 2014). For this reason, a survey and pilot project were conducted to explore and understand the types of support services students needed.

Preliminary Survey

- a. **Purpose of the survey:** The purpose of the survey was to explore students' perceptions of the support services they needed in their institution.
- b. **Research question:** What support services do students need in their institution?
To answer the research question, the following sub-questions were investigated:
How do students integrate into their new environment? How do they manage their time? How do they manage stress? What support services do they need? What do they think of creating a student support services center in their institution? The results of the survey informed the implementation of the pilot project discussed later in this paper.
- c. **Sampling:** About 800 male and female students studying in a limited admissions institution participated in the survey. A convenience sampling method was applied. This means that the researchers surveyed those accessible students who agreed to respond (Gavard-Perret, 2012).
- d. **Questionnaire administration and processing:**
 - The survey was informed by a questionnaire and was administered face-to-face from January to April 2016. As one of the methods that bring together the

interviewer and the respondent, in-person administration is considered to ensure a high response rate (Neuman, 2015).

- The questionnaire design and data processing were conducted using Sphinx software.
- The questionnaire was designed according to Vincent Tinto's (1993) student departure model.

Results of the preliminary survey

Results of the preliminary survey

Descriptive statistical analysis showed that the survey's response rate was 66%. Some 527 participants completed the questionnaire about their perceptions of the student support services in their institution, of whom 56.0% were female, and 48.2% and 32.9% were first and second-year students, respectively. The main variables retained were students' integration in their institution, their self-perception, stress management, need for support, and perception of creating a student support services center in the institution:

- Student integration:** According to the descriptive statistics, 42.4% of the participants found it difficult to integrate into the institution's environment. Of all the participants, 27.9% found it difficult to adapt to the teaching style and 26.4% found it difficult to establish contact with the teachers, while 19.5% of them found it difficult to make new friends, and 19.2% of the participants found it difficult to make contact with the administrative staff.
- Students' self-perception:** About 45% of the participants estimated they were extraverted, and 12.7% estimated that they were introverts.

- c. **Students' stress-related issues:** heavy course loads (25.7%), oral presentations (25.4%), and exams (22.9%) were the main causes of student stress.
- d. **Students' problem management:** Close to two-thirds (62.3%) of the participants managed their problems by themselves, 14.6% sought help from parents, and 13.6% from friends. However, only 2.6% of the participants sought help from teachers.
- e. **Student Support Services (SSS):** Student support was considered very important at the university level by 46.5% of the participants, of whom 33.8% felt support would best be provided by a teacher, 32.4% by a coach, 26.0% by a peer student, and 23.0% of participants believed support would best be provided by a psychologist.
- f. **Creation of a Student Support Services Center (SSSC):** In the quest for solutions to students' need for support, 64.2% of the participants were in favor of establishing a Student Support Services Center (SSSC) at their institution.
- g. **SSSC utility:** Regarding an SSSC's utility to students, 49.9% of the participants believed that an SSSC would be useful in dealing with stress management, 48.2% in helping students to build up self-confidence, 43.6% in enhancing academic success, 42.9% in improving integration, and 38.3% in time management.

Preliminary survey conclusions

First, the survey results showed that the transition from high school to university entailed some difficulties. Second, students were aware of the type of problems they had and the type of support they needed. Third, teacher and coach support were students'

top choices of support providers. Finally, students were in favor of creating a student support services center (SSSC). Nevertheless, due to the sampling procedure and the lack of rigorous statistical tests, the results of this survey cannot be extrapolated beyond the participants in this survey.

Pilot Project

Objectives

Based on the survey results, a pilot project was conducted at the institution where the researchers work as teachers. It consisted of creating a student support services center (SSSC) and represented a small-scale, preliminary project carried out to evaluate the feasibility, length, and cost of a more permanent SSSC. The purpose of the project was to thoroughly investigate two main areas: the type of difficulties students encountered after matriculation in that institution and the type of support they needed to help them overcome those difficulties. Three questions guided this project: 1) What difficulties do students encounter at the institution? 2) Who encounters these difficulties, and 3) What type of student support services do students need?

Participants and setting of the SSSC

The survey results showed that students were interested in two main kinds of support, namely, academic and psychosocial. Based on these results, the mission conferred on the SSSC was to provide these two types of support. The purpose of the academic support (namely, tutoring) was to assist students in matters related to methodology and course content. The purpose of the psychosocial support was to help students overcome their psychosocial difficulties and promote their personal development.

With the consent of our institution's administration, the SSSC was set up in September 2017. It was supported by the institution's administrative staff and by a number of teachers, students, coaches, and therapists. The researchers undertook its creation, organization, implementation, and daily management (communication, student advising, appointments, etc.). Nine students and seven volunteer teachers from various departments agreed to provide academic support. Volunteer professionals, namely, three certified coaches and two psychologists, agreed to provide the psychosocial support necessary to conduct this pilot project. The SSSC was set up in an office that was arranged for receiving students with all the necessary documents, furniture, stationery, decoration, etc. From September 2017 and throughout the year, teachers, administrators, and students participating in the project started promoting the existence and purpose of the SSSC. Posters containing information on this new service were displayed all over the institution.

The student support services provided

The SSSC offered tutoring, coaching, and therapy services. Coaching and therapy sessions took place at the institution or at the coaches' and therapists' offices, according to the student's preference. To this purpose, a meeting was organized with all the volunteer members of the project (researchers, teachers, students, coaches, therapists, and administrators) to reiterate the objectives of the project and agree on the procedures, ethics, and deontology to observe. Students who benefitted from the SSSC were informed in advance about the purpose of the project. Those who agreed to take part in it were informed that their confidentiality was formally guaranteed and that, with their consent, only the results relevant to the project could be disclosed (anonymously) for publication or for the institution to take action. Furthermore, as researchers, we could only disclose what the coach or the therapist allowed us to disclose.

Pilot project findings

The September orientation program was an opportunity to inform students about the SSSC. The first participants started enrolling in November 2017, and the project lasted until June 2018. The center received 35 students (31 females and four males), including first, second, and third year students. The youngest student was 18 years old, and the oldest was 26. Students either contacted the SSSC by themselves, or were advised to contact the SSSC by a teacher, an administrator, or a friend who had had an SSSC experience. Thirty-two students from different levels of studies and departments took advantage of individual coaching, with five to seven sessions each over six months: nine first-year students, 13 from second year, and 10 from third year. Among these students, three attended therapy sessions (one first-year and two third-year students). It should be noted that no student expressed a need for academic support at the SSSC and therefore, the teacher and peer support proved unnecessary.

The issues addressed and reported by the coaches included: students' integration, self-confidence, motivation, self-perception, stress management, time management, fear of failure, fear of public speaking, peer relationships, family relationships, and mourning. The issues reported by the psychologist were substance abuse and anorexia. It appears that all the difficulties students encountered were related to psychosocial issues (fear of public speaking, peer relationships, etc.) rather than academic issues. It was interesting to note that students from different levels of studies all needed psychosocial support. Unexpectedly, second- and third-year students were more numerous in taking advantage of coaching, which may indicate that students need support regardless of age and level of education. It was also interesting to note that peers played an important role in promoting coaching at the SSSC. Students who had

benefited from coaching encouraged other students to seek coaching support at the SSSC, thus creating a nascent and promising culture of student support at the institution.

After six months, the participants completed a questionnaire, the results of which showed that they were satisfied with their relationship with the coach or the therapist. Most of them reported that the coach had helped them regain confidence in themselves and have a better understanding of their academic and life goals. Two first-year students decided to transfer to another institution and were satisfied with their decision, believing coaching helped them finally put an end to their “wrong academic choice” and feeling of guilt toward their family. Another first-year student who was about to leave the institution resumed his courses diligently thanks to therapy, which the therapist decided to extend for him free of charge.

Pilot project conclusion

It can be concluded that the SSSC pilot project was useful in determining what types of difficulty students encountered, what type of support they needed, when they needed support, and whose support they needed. The findings indicated that the participants did not express a need for academic support and tutoring. This finding was not surprising as the project took place in a limited admissions institution, where admission is based on students' good academic records. However, the number of students in need of psychosocial support was surprising. This interest may have been due in part to the novelty of the project. Psychosocial support has never existed in this institution, and while promoting the project this aspect may have aroused students' curiosity.

Based on these findings, it can be assumed that tutoring may be useful when providing information and helping students to resolve issues related to their academic performance. However, tutoring may not be useful in enhancing academic integration when students need an in-depth exploration of psychosocial issues such as the fear of

failure and the fear of public speaking that emerged at the SSSC (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010; Newton & Ender, 2010; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Moreover, an exploration of behavioral and emotional issues cannot be handled by teachers or postgraduate tutors; it requires the expertise of other professionals, just as it was handled by a therapist and a coach in this pilot project.

Today, the positive effects of coaching have been proven in universities that use coaching as a human developmental support model for students. For example, Bettinger and Baker's (2011) research on the effects of coaching on students at Stanford University indicated that individualized coaching was an effective tool in enhancing student persistence in college. Bettinger and Baker (2011) found that coaching had positive effects on coached cohorts and stated that this positive effect "persisted for at least one more year after the coaching had concluded" (p. 3). Moreover, coaching was more beneficial and effective than medication for students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Field et al., 2010).

Project feasibility

This project may be feasible on a larger scale. However, to convert it into sustainable action, it would be helpful for institutions to reconsider the voluntary status of the people engaged in student support services. This project was feasible because the teachers, students, administrators, coaches, and the therapist participated voluntarily in making the SSSC happen. However, an SSSC requires a budget that would need to be taken into consideration. An SSSC would have to be implemented within the institution's global policy and operated under its auspices to ensure its sustainability.

In addition, it may be helpful for the institution to engage in more rigorous longitudinal and qualitative studies for a more in-depth investigation of the nature of students' difficulties and an exploration of the most relevant student support services.

Evaluating students' perceptions of support may be an important step towards enhancing their persistence and an essential step for institutions in enhancing their retention.

Conclusion

First, this paper outlined the essence of the tutoring and coaching support models that are used in some higher institutions today. Second, it presented the results of a preliminary survey exploring what support services students felt they needed in their institution. The findings were then described of the pilot project conducted to explore students' actual difficulties through the creation of a student support services center in a limited admissions institution. It was concluded that the creation of a student support services center may enhance the quality of their learning experience and persistence by meeting their need for support.

By being provided with academic tutoring and psychosocial support, students could benefit from a holistic developmental model able to help them progress academically and develop personally. An institution's mission would thus contribute to forming successful graduates that were equipped with lasting developmental change not only for themselves but for society in general.

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