

## UNDERSTANDING STUDENT MOTIVATION: A KEY TO RETENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

This paper explores what motivates college students at different stages of their academic studies. Using Herzberg's two-factor theory, the researchers conducted a survey of 535 students in three south-western universities to determine if motivations changed throughout their academic careers. Results showed that students at different stages of their college careers have different concerns and, as such, different motivational strategies are needed to respond to their concerns. Implications are given to grow and retain enrolment.

**Keywords:** motivation, higher education retention, enrollment, satisfaction

**JEL classification:** M31

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions today more than ever are facing major challenges because of the current decline in student enrollment. This is due to the attitude of prospective and current students toward higher education, the merits of college education versus its cost, and competitiveness among large number of for-profit and not-for profit universities and colleges. Thus, institutions are struggling to keep their share of the shrinking pie and to retain students until graduation. Understanding the needs and wants as well as the motivation of both prospective and current students is the cornerstone of satisfying them throughout their years in the institution and probably keeping them for life as alumni.

Given this, raising retention rates has prevailed as the solution; however, student retention has been a challenging problem for academic institutions. In reality, administrators and faculty at many institutions have exerted efforts to satisfy and motivate students, hoping to retain them. While colleges and universities have been learning to market to their students/customers, and even to some extent, to measure and manage satisfaction, student populations have been seen as a unified whole. Once recruited and enrolled, students have

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become a single segment and have not been treated differently regarding satisfaction and motivation (Lainson, 2014). The researchers hypothesize that the factors impacting students' satisfaction and motivation change over the course of their academic careers much like consumers' needs and wants change over their life cycle, suggesting that universities consider different motivational strategies to achieve increased retention and graduation rates.

Hence, the purpose of the study was to determine if student motivation and satisfaction change throughout students' college careers. Specifically, the objectives were to determine: (a) satisfaction and motivation among students at different class standings, and, (b) what satisfies students to stay at the institution until graduation. Findings from the study will assist institutions of higher education in developing strategies beyond the first and second years to keep students motivated until graduation and create a firm foundation for a life-long relationship with the university as alumni.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many attempts are cited in the literature addressing the measurement of student satisfaction in higher education; however, Rowley, in 1996 was the first to apply Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation (Herzberg, 1966) in an examination of educational staff and their motivation. In Herzberg's original model, he identified one group of factors that were responsible for motivating and another group responsible for preventing dissatisfaction among employees; these two groups of factors worked independently from each other, but were linked interdependently in providing motivation. In the years later, the relevance and validity of Herzberg's two-factor theory in measuring satisfaction in educational setting has been discussed extensively in the literature, and it was confirmed by a number of studies that Herzberg's model remains not only reliable, but also valid (Bassett-Jones and Lloyd, 2005; DeShields *et al.*, 2005; Kara and DeShields, 2004; Keaveney and Young, 1997).

In 1997, Keaveney and Young used the two-factor framework to develop a new model for examining student satisfaction and retention. They developed the student satisfaction and retention model (SSRM) to examine how the two-factor theory could be applied to students in higher education. The model called for three factors leading to the student college experience and then satisfaction. The factors were: (a) faculty (understanding, accessible, professional, helpful, provide feedback), (b) advising staff (accessible, reliable, helpful, responsive, understanding), and (c) classes (real-world relevance, course scheduling, and project/cases skills). These factors led the student college experience (cognitive development, career progress, and business skills) and contributed to student satisfaction. DeShields *et al.* (2005), building on the study of Keaveney and Young (1997), validated Herzberg's theory and found that students' college experience was positively related to their satisfaction and intention to stay at the same college or university.

In 2008, Maddox and Nicholson tested the viability of the Business Student Satisfaction Inventory (BSSI). Originally developed by Maddox in 1995, it served as a tool to assess student satisfaction as an indicator of overall educational quality and effectiveness. Using confirmatory factor analysis, four factors emerged as the basis of student satisfaction: quality of business education outcomes, quality of school climate, quality of advising, and quality of computer resources (Maddox and Nicholson, 2008). Many components of these factors were incorporated indirectly in the present study.

In another study by [Tessema et al. \(2012\)](#), the researchers asserted that students' satisfaction surveys are important in assessing whether colleges and universities are fulfilling their mission and concluded that eleven academically related factors were found to be salient and positively correlated with students' satisfaction with major curriculum. These factors included required course availability for major, course availability for electives in major, quality of instruction, major course content, variety of courses in major, capstone experiences, academic advising, overall college experience, preparation for career or graduate school, class size of major, and grading in major courses. The authors suggested that the findings of their study should serve as part of the planning process for universities when asked to evaluate effectiveness of their colleges, departments and programs.

Other researchers studied the factors influencing students to leave an institution or transfer to another one ([Azar and Reshadatjoo, 2014](#); [Becker, 2008](#); [Mallinckrodt and Sedlacek, 2009](#); [McDonald and Varena, 2007](#); [Schneider and Ward, 2003](#)). Among the reasons, some students leave for reasons that may be beyond institutional control, such as lack of financing, changing academic or career goals, or personal circumstances; however, many more students leave because the institution has failed to create an environment, inside or outside the classroom, that is conducive to their learning and educational needs (i.e. dissatisfaction with the university, poor student-institution fit, dissatisfaction with the education, discouragement among students due to improper infrastructure, and lack of motivation to do well in school). Moreover, studies found that student motivation was positively influenced by campus relationships with faculty and staff ([Mahan et al., 2014](#)). Essentially, when students were satisfied, the probability of retention and graduation from the same institution increased. Result from these studies, however, suggested that focusing on first-year programs to deliver claims made to prospective students is not sufficient to retain students, and university leaders need a better understanding of the entire four-year experience. College career counselors, advisors, faculty and staff can positively influence student retention; however they have to understand what will satisfy and motivate students – as individuals or in cohorts – at different stages of their academic careers ([DeWitz et al., 2009](#); [Mahan et al., 2014](#)).

In 1987, [Tinto](#) proposed the dynamic model of institutional departure, stating that student retention was clearly dependent on the student's institutional experiences. In other words, students who were satisfied with the formal and informal academic and social systems in a college or university tended to stay in school. To the contrary, students who had negative interactions and experiences tended to become disillusioned with college, withdraw from their peers and faculty members, and ultimately, the institution.

In addition, the student's experience and thus satisfaction and motivation in the latter years of their academic careers have long-term implications to the university or college. Students who feel captive in the latter part of their academic careers, dissatisfied and unmotivated, do not transfer to another university due to switching costs in efforts, time, and money, and thus, can't wait to graduate and leave the university. Such a negative disposition among graduates does not serve the university in the long term in alumni engagement.

In summary, although the literature is rich in examining students' satisfaction, motivation and retention, attention has been centered on students' freshman and sophomore years. The present study develops and tests a conceptual model of student motivation and retention that reflects the duration of students' academic careers. This model incorporates a comprehensive set of independent variables that are hypothesized to predict student satisfaction and motivation (based on self-reported experiential assessments) until

graduation and beyond. The proposed model is customer-oriented as it does not focus on the acquisition of students and motivating them in the first two years, but through every step of the way to graduation ensuring loyal alumni and university friends for life.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical framework hypothesizes that students throughout their academic careers pass through different stages during their freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years with different concerns, problems, and needs at each stage. The authors label these stages as discovery, establishment, engagement, and future-driven, highlighting the different strategies needed to keep students motivated and engaged until graduation and developing long-term/life-long relationships with students as alumni.

#### **Discovery stage**

At this stage students are excited about going to college, feel more independent and are transitioning to a life different from high school. Many students move away from home either to a different area or different state and, hence, focus on adapting to their new surroundings. In this stage universities would do best to make that discovery pleasant by meeting or surpassing student expectations formulated during recruitment and orientation. For example, improving and extending advising and guidance services, paying particular attention to the early stages of learning, such as student induction, initial assessment and the establishment of group ethos and identity; close monitoring and follow-up of poor attendance, early identification of under-performing students or students who are “at risk”, and early diagnosis of student requirements for basic skills and additional learning support (Martinez, 2001). Universities would fare best to invest in a variety of support services to insure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse background.

#### **Establishment stage**

At this stage students declare their major course of study, have been introduced to the spectrum of activities on- and off-campus, made new friends, and have formed an impression about the university in general. Any unfavorable changes affecting students’ lives during their university experience may shake their confidence in the system and lead to a state of rejection that could be detrimental to their matriculation and the university as a whole. Therefore, consistency in support for students through a different set of motivational factors is needed at this stage, especially those that match students’ changing expectations. Some suggestions for resolving major problems identified in the discovery stage include advising, structuring a time management plan, enhancing faculty-student relationships, and outlining a clear path for the student’s field of study.

#### **Engagement stage**

Students in this stage are involved in some activities at the university, are familiar with their professors, are working to improve their GPAs from their first and second years, are maturing, and now are thinking seriously about what they will do upon graduation. Oftentimes, students at this stage fall in love with the university and the cultivation of life-long relationships with peers. Here, the motivational strategies that capture students’ aspirations are critical to ensuring retention and graduation from the university. For example, creating student educational experiences that are challenging, enriching and extend

their academic abilities, and that enable students to develop their social and cultural capital. Moreover, such experiences allow students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives, enabling them to become active citizens (Zepke and Leach, 2010).

#### **Future-driven Stage - loyalty or divorce**

At this stage questions persist among students regarding what they will do after graduation. As students near completion questions arise regarding the university's role in preparing them for life after graduation and their ability to get good jobs or pursue higher degrees. Today, students are concerned with whether they will be able to follow their chosen career path upon graduation and whether they will be able to pay off their loans. Although research has shown that students will continue until graduation even if they don't like the school because of transfer costs, for universities, this stage presents challenges to continually motivate students to remain and complete their studies amidst their overwhelming vulnerable feelings to ensure matriculation and a life-long relationship with the university.

Given the above, the challenge for universities is to develop strategies that meets students' needs at each of these stages that will satisfy and motivate them so that universities are able to increase retention and graduation rates and ensure life-long advocates for the institution regarding engagement and support. Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were developed: (1) Satisfaction/motivation factors change as students advance through class standings from freshman to senior year; and (2) students who are satisfied/motivated will have positive attitudes toward the university and will stay until they graduate.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

An exploratory investigation was initially conducted and included focus groups with students at different years of study, in-depth interviews with administrators, and thorough review of relevant literature. The exploratory research assisted in identifying important factors contributing to students' motivations and satisfaction with their university, as well as providing the foundation in developing the questionnaire used in the survey.

An instrument was developed to assess the following: (a) maintenance factors, (b) motivation factors, (c) institutional factors, and (d) demographic characteristics. The first part of the questionnaire included 43 attitudinal statements using a forced 4-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" (4) to "strongly disagree" (1). The authors believed that students have the tendency not to express their opinion while they are enrolled at the university and a forced scale would provide more robust perceptions of motivation. Sixteen of the statements were used to assess the level of satisfaction with 16 identified maintenance/dissatisfaction factors. Students were then asked to rate their level of agreement with seven motivating factors such as "get to know my professors personally," "succeed in my chosen career path" and "study hard in school." The questionnaire sought to determine motivating and maintenance factors important to students in their current institution. The second part of the instrument sought to determine factors that contributed to students' satisfaction with their institution as well as factors that motivated them to succeed and addressed related issues to faculty, course offerings and learning outcomes, and university policies and services. The final part of the questionnaire sought demographic information and included university and high school GPA and class standing.

The dependent variables were maintenance/satisfaction and motivation and were measured via four statements. Maintenance/satisfaction focused on recommending the university and whether to stay or transfer from it and was measured by these two statements: (a) "I would recommend this university to a friend or family member," and (b) "I am considering transferring to another college or university before graduation because I am dissatisfied at this university." Motivational factors were measured using the statements "I am motivated to finish my major and graduate," and "I am motivated to succeed in my chosen career path".

The survey was distributed to a convenience sample of students enrolled in business-related classes, in two private liberal arts universities and one public university in Southern California. While the surveys were not restricted to students majoring in an area of business, 67.5% of the respondents indicated that they were business majors. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. A total of 535 questionnaires were completed and data were analyzed using SPSS.

## 5. RESULTS

### Sample Statistics

Five hundred and thirty-five respondents completed the survey. Of that, 284 (53%) were female and 251(47%) were male. The greatest number (34.2%) of respondents were juniors followed by seniors (26.0%), predominately white (39.6%) and Hispanic (35.9%). Regarding religious affiliation 27.5% were non-denominational Christians and most (62.9%) graduated from non-Christian high schools; however, over one-fourth (26.4%) of the respondents declined to state their religious affiliation altogether. Finally, most (67.5%) of respondents lived off-campus and work 6-10 hours per week (31.6%) while over one-third (33%) work 11 plus hours per week.

### Maintenance Factors

Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with 16 maintenance/dissatisfaction factors. The four areas rated lowest by respondents were "availability of parking," "availability of classes for my major," "value for tuition dollar," and "food quality and selection." The four highest rated areas were "interpersonal relationships with other students," "support staff in major department," "personal safety and security," and "maintenance and cleanliness of class room." The top-rated four areas also had the lowest standard deviations, indicating that the students' responses were more tightly clustered around the mean (see [Table no. 1](#)). Using reliability analysis, the split-half coefficient was .870, and the Spearman-Brown corrected correlation  $r = .873$  confirming the reliability of the scale.

**Table no. 1 – Level of satisfaction with dissatisfaction/maintenance factors**

<b>I am Satisfied with:</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>
Availability of parking	2.51	.853
Availability of classes for my major	2.63	.889
Value for tuition dollar	2.70	.846
Food quality and selection	2.72	.804
Financial aid office	2.92	.835
Student finance office	2.96	.746
Level of positive school spirit	2.99	.794
Registrar or records office	3.03	.706

<b>I am Satisfied with:</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>
Academic advisor	3.10	.764
Maintenance/Cleanliness of resident halls	3.12	.761
Resident hall personnel	3.12	.696
Library hours and service	3.20	.703
Interpersonal relationships w/other students	3.23	.692
Support staff in major department	3.23	.675
Personal safety and security	3.24	.674
Maintenance/Cleanliness of class room	3.36	.627

*Note: N= 535*

### **Motivation Factors**

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding motivation in seven areas. The areas where respondents indicated their lowest level of motivation was “to get to know my professors personally” but scores indicated that they were highly motivated to “finish my major and graduate,” “achieve good grades in my class” and “succeed in my chosen career path” (see [Table no. 2](#)). Using reliability analysis, the split-half coefficient was .849, and the Spearman-Brown corrected correlation  $r = .864$  confirming the reliability of the scale.

**Table no. 2 – Level of motivation with satisfaction/motivation factors**

<b>I am motivated to:</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Get to know my professors personally	2.82	0.773
Develop interpersonal relationships with students	3.13	0.737
Study hard in my classes	3.34	0.701
Obtain as much knowledge as possible	3.40	0.623
Achieve good grades in my class	3.61	0.553
Succeed in my chosen career path	3.61	0.553
Finish my major and graduate	3.62	0.604

*Note: N= 535*

### **University Experience Factors**

As previous research purports satisfaction relies in a large part on the faculty-student relationship and classes. Results showed that the majority (86.5%) of respondents agreed that faculty members showed care and concern for them (Mean = 3.21, Std. Dev. = .679) and were able to obtain answers and feedback in a timely manner (Mean 3.07, St. Dev. = .659). Moreover, almost all (89.3% and 94.8% respectfully) respondents indicated that faculty were effective teachers (Mean = 3.17, Std. Dev. = .628); and were competent/knowledgeable in their subject areas (Mean = 3.36, Std. Dev. = .549). Overall results showed a strong agreement among respondents regarding faculty in their respective universities are concerned about their success, are competent, and are responsive.

Regarding courses and learning outcomes, the majority (90.2%) of respondents agreed (and strongly agreed) that content taught in courses was relevant to the real world (Mean = 3.22, Std. Dev. = .638) and that courses taken were intellectually challenging (Mean = 3.16, Std. Dev. = .632). Similarly, most (89.2% and 87.0% respectfully) respondents agreed that they were learning skills necessary to succeed in the workforce (Mean 3.17, Std. Dev. = .647) and that the projects and cases assigned allowed them to grow in their desired field (Mean = 3.13, Std. Dev. = .655) (see [Table no. 3](#)).

**Table no. 3 – University experience factors**

<b>University Experience</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Faculty members show care and concern for students	3.21	.679
Faculty members are effective teachers	3.17	.628
Faculty members are competent/knowledgeable in their subject area	3.36	.549
Content taught in the courses is relevant to the real world	3.22	.638
The courses I have taken have been intellectually challenging	3.16	.632
I am learning practical skills necessary to succeed in the workplace	3.17	.647
I am able to obtain answers and timely feedback about my performance from faculty members	3.07	.659
Projects and cases that I have been assigned in my classes have allowed me to grow in my desired field	3.13	.655

#### **Analysis of Dependent Variables**

Regarding the dependent variables used in this study (considering transferring to another university, and recommending the university to friends and family), the following results were reported. Only 16.7% of students considered transferring to another college or university before graduation because they were dissatisfied at the current university (Mean = 1.73, Std. Dev. = .843); and 86.0% agreed that they would recommend their current university to a friend or family member (Mean = 3.19, Std. Dev. = .740).

A key component of the research design was to determine changes regarding maintenance/satisfaction and motivation factors based upon a student's class standing. When comparing means of the 16 maintenance/satisfaction areas across class standing, results suggested that the level of satisfaction decreases as students' progress from freshmen to seniors. This difference became apparent when comparing freshmen and seniors (see [Table no. 4](#)).

**Table no. 4 – Comparison of Maintenance Factors among freshman and Seniors**

	<b>What is your current class standing?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Mann-Whitney U Test</b>
I am satisfied with the food quality and selection in the cafeteria	Freshman	99	2.92	$z = -4.211$
	Senior	128	2.49	$P = .000$
I am satisfied with the availability of parking on campus	Freshman	102	2.56	$z = -2.007$
	Senior	137	2.34	$p = .045$
I am satisfied with my residence hall personnel	Freshman	66	3.20	$z = -2.431$
	Senior	69	2.91	$P = .015$
I am satisfied with the maintenance/cleanliness of residence halls	Freshman	72	3.25	$Z = -3.101$
	Senior	81	2.85	$P = .002$
I am satisfied with the level of positive school spirit on campus	Freshman	103	3.14	$Z = -4.046$
	Senior	134	2.73	$P = .000$
I am satisfied with the value I receive for my tuition dollar	Freshman	99	2.90	$Z = -2.617$
	Senior	133	2.62	$P = .009$
I am satisfied with the registrar or records office	Freshman	102	3.11	$Z = -2.744$
	Senior	138	2.83	$P = .006$
I am satisfied with the financial aid office (loans, grants, scholarships)	Freshman	98	2.94	$Z = -1.957$
	Senior	128	2.73	$P = .050$
I am satisfied with the library hours and service	Freshman	104	3.41	$Z = -3.547$
	Senior	136	3.07	$P = .000$

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$

Given the nature of the data, the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine significant differences between these independent groups. Results were significantly different for nine areas of maintenance/dissatisfaction factors and included the food quality and selection in the cafeteria, parking, residence hall maintenance/cleanliness and personnel, school spirit, value for their tuition dollar, registrar/records office, financial aid, and library.

When comparing means of the seven motivational factors, it was noted that respondents reported a decline for the majority of factors for the two groups except for their motivation to finish their major and graduate where the mean was slightly higher for seniors than freshmen (see [Table no. 5](#)).

**Table no. 5 – Comparison of Motivation Factors among freshman and Seniors**

	What is your current class standing?	N	Mean	Mann-Whitney U Test
I am motivated to finish my major(s) and graduate	Freshman	104	3.56	Z = -2.237
	Senior	138	3.70	P = .025
I am motivated to study hard in my classes	Freshman	104	3.47	Z = -3.019
	Senior	139	3.18	P = .003
I am motivated to achieve good grades in my classes	Freshman	104	3.61	Z = 2.954
	Senior	138	3.38	P = .003
I am motivated to obtain as much knowledge as possible from my classes	Freshman	103	3.49	Z = -2.213
	Senior	139	3.33	P = .027
I am motivated to develop interpersonal relationships with my fellow students	Freshman	103	3.35	Z = -3.570
	Senior	135	3.02	P = .000

Note: \*  $p < .01$

To determine if these differences between the groups, the Mann-Whitney U test was used and revealed significant differences for four motivational factors and included studying hard, achieving good grades, gaining knowledge and developing interpersonal relationships; in each case the mean was lower for seniors than for freshmen (see [Table no. 5](#)).

## 6. DISCUSSIONS

Results suggest that students' satisfaction and motivations differ throughout their academic lives as seen for freshmen and seniors. Seniors were more likely than freshmen to be less satisfied with their university in several key areas (food, maintenance, school spirit, and value), and indicated that university policies and procedures frustrated them. Also, they were less motivated than freshmen to achieve good grades, obtain as much knowledge as possible from their classes, and develop interpersonal relationships with other students; however, they were more motivated to finish their major than were freshmen. Perhaps most importantly to the university, seniors were less satisfied with the value they receive for their tuition dollars, and less likely to recommend the university to a friend or family member. Results showed that as students advance in class standing and move closer to graduation, initial efforts to treat them like good customers and manage satisfaction wear off; in turn, students ultimately respond as disappointed customers often do. The perceived value of their collegiate experience diminishes and they may become less likely to refer "new customers." This is a devastating indictment for colleges and universities whose first line of marketing should be active referrals from delighted alumni. Overall, in many key areas, as students

move through class standings from freshmen to seniors, the level of dissatisfaction grows and the level of motivation decreases.

Even with these findings, the implications for higher education are significant. Regarding motivation and satisfaction, the important relationship is between the institution and the student. The main goal of achieving motivation is to create an environment that enables the customer/student to be satisfied and motivated regarding the organization, a condition necessary for creating synergy or well-being, which lies at the heart of motivational psychology. Even if dissatisfied, students will likely be “motivated” to graduate just to “move” on. In this case the student is being moved by the lure of graduation, but is not necessarily motivated. Should dissatisfaction increase, motivation and attitudes towards the university may be severely hampered in the long term.

It is likely that seniors’ increase in dissatisfaction and decrease in motivation will affect their future relationship with their alma maters; specifically, the potential for alumni giving and participation in future events. Furthermore, two key areas that emerged related to a student’s satisfaction were value and expectations. Since value for tuition dollar, accurate portrayal of the university in marketing materials, and the school living up to the students’ expectations were significantly related to the student’s likelihood of transferring to a different college or university, it becomes apparent that schools need to manage students’ value and expectations better to improve retention rates. However, just focusing on the retention rates may fall short of building that long-term relationship with graduates as alumni. Reason being, by the time a student is a senior, it becomes less feasible to transfer to another school and graduate on time. In fact, students may even feel trapped. Though they are unlikely to transfer at this point, their dissatisfaction is likely to have a negative impact on the university.

Dissatisfied seniors may become punitive – not through leaving, but in attitude and actions related to alumni issues, future recommendations and negatively perceived brand awareness. Universities must consider strategies to maintain the relationship from freshman all the way to senior year to insure continuous involvement as an engaged alums.

## **7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study revealed students’ needs, problems, and aspirations over the course of their academic careers changes from year to year and what satisfies and motivates them changes as well. Higher education is a service and providers should aspire to meet students’ expectation at the outset and keep them satisfied and motivated during their university experience to win them for life.

Keeping in mind the relationship marketing philosophy of “acquire, keep, and grow customers as friends for life,” findings suggest that universities must rethink their recruitment and retention strategies to improve students’ satisfaction with their academic experience throughout their college careers. Although much effort is paid to students’ first two years in recruitment and retention efforts, findings indicate that university strategies should continue to reach out to them in their subsequent years to minimize dissatisfaction.

Just as companies have identified the need to target and acquire new customers differently from how they manage and grow existing ones, colleges and universities should strongly consider employing similar management and marketing strategies. A one-size-fits-all approach to satisfaction may not be the most effective or enough to win the battle of retention. The long-term risks to alumni relationships, giving, recommendations, referrals and brand awareness are too significant to ignore. Universities today must be customer-

oriented and align their organizational structure, resources, processes and procedures to become as such.

Given the distinguishing features of colleges and universities, the value should be based on the long-term interests of students and institutional goals and commitments. It is the quality of the experience and relationship that benefits both a higher education institution and its students. Effective engagement practices may lie in developing programs targeted at specific student groups campus-wide. The following are selected recommendations to effectively reach out to students as they move from one stage to another in their academic careers.

At the Discovery stage, newly arrived freshmen are starting to build their experiences with the university as they encounter for the first time the products and services provided by the institution. Here, university personnel are entrusted to deliver what is promised during recruitment and orientation – while it is still fresh in students' minds. Faculty and staff must be prepared to assess difficulties students are facing and assist them to overcome and solve them as well as provide different learning environments for those who are struggling or with behavioural problems. It is important that those who are engaged with students during this time are sensitive and sympathetic to the fact that students are in a transitional period and strive to make it easier for students to succeed.

During the Establishment stage, students realize the depth and duration of their commitment to obtain a degree. At this stage, the university would benefit by reaching out to this group with targeted messages that encourage and support this goal and to offer suggestions to improve their experience such as identification of student organizations and services. Even though students know their way around, problems still occur, presenting opportunities for institutions to further build relationships with students. It is critical that universities maintain a relationship with students to build positive attitudes toward it given that students desire a sense of belonging at this stage. Additionally, institutions should continually strive toward providing students with meaningful learning environments to reinforce the connection with the institution and further develop a sense of belonging within the student body.

In the Engagement stage, students have, for the most part, decided their major and established their social life on campus, are learning about possible career opportunities, and are looking forward to enhancing their competencies and skills as they prepare for entering the work force or graduate school. Institutions should partner with students and accompany them along this path with strategies and tactics that enhance that partnership. For example, connectivity with students both in and outside of the classroom through activities, such as small group career meetings, enhances rapport and promotes engagement throughout their academic careers. Additionally, employing inquiry-based learning provides opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and develop analytical skills by choosing activities that interest them. Institutions are encouraged to build in flexibility in learning models so that students continue to be motivated to demonstrate skill and knowledge in their field of study.

At the Future-driven stage, challenges mount for students as they juggle trying to excel in their classes, graduate, and get a job with no clear direction in sight. Institutions should acknowledge such pressure and assist students with information on time management, handling stress, as well as the successful career search. To enhance job prospects, students should be encouraged to do internships to gain work experience and build networking opportunities while applying knowledge gained in the classroom. Services directed to students' job placement should include resume building as well as networking opportunities with alumni. By remaining connected with students during this critical stage, institutions

will help minimize students' negative feelings that they are alone in this endeavor and will build relationships that extend beyond graduation and be mutually rewarding.

Findings from the study suggest that university administrators should have a well-defined target market, carefully profile their students/customers, and use database marketing strategies and tactics that speak directly to and interact with individual students. Addressing changing student needs and motivations with different strategies would enhance the student's experience and enhance retention while remaining positive toward the institution. Although this suggested approach of varied strategies is time- and resource-consuming, institutions would be better off (financially) to be sensitive to these differences and address them. Universities have been hesitant to dive into "marketing" to current students; however, students today are consumers with many educational options. As administrators work to recruit and manage enrolment while achieving retention and matriculation rates, understanding that students' satisfaction with the university and motivation to graduate evolve throughout their lifetime at the institution and addressing these critical issues will help the institution create life-long friends and alumni.

## 8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

The key limitation to this study was its scope. The study was limited to a convenience sample drawn from three south-western universities (two private and one public), with an overwhelmingly number of business major respondents. Future research might also examine the impact of students' career plans on satisfaction and motivation to graduate. Finally, future research should survey students from diverse majors and from a multitude of public and private colleges across the country to determine differences in satisfaction and motivation by region, institution type, and major.

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