

To Stay or Not to Stay? Reflections on International Student Retention

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Sofia Marshak's passions include language, culture, and education. Originally from Estonia, she lived, traveled, and studied in Germany and Ecuador. Professionally, Sofia has over 17 years of teaching experience with four languages (English, Spanish, German, and Russian) at all levels (elementary, middle, high school, and college), supervising and instructing new teachers as well as students. Academically, Sofia holds a doctorate in Education from George Washington University, a masters in TESOL from University of Maryland, and bachelors in German and Spanish languages. She joined Cascadia College in Fall 2014 and has enjoyed every moment! When not teaching, she also enjoys reading, studying history, hiking, indoor gardening, and of course traveling.

In 2018-2019, the English Language Program faculty, International Program staff, and Associate Dean participated in an FLC on retention. It was a valuable experience, as we had an opportunity to delve deeper into our own retention data and the prior research dealing with this topic. So, why did we decide to do this, and what did we take away from this experience?

The “Why” or Rationale for Focusing on Retention

The issue of retention has been an area of scholarly interest since the 1960s during a time when college attendance drastically increased (Voigt & Hundrieser, 2008). This topic recently caught our renewed attention when the number of students applying to our ELP program began a steady decline, perhaps due to various changes in the political climate. As teaching faculty, we have limited impact on the international standing of our country and minor involvement in marketing and recruiting activities. Day-to-day classroom experiences do fall within our sphere of influence, so we focused our attention on identifying which activities and practices provide better results, and on what can we do on the classroom level to increase student engagement and persistence.

The “What” or Take-Aways from the FLC

- Interaction with host nationals, “individuals from the country where the student is studying” (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011, p. 282) is beneficial for retention, student satisfaction, and persistence. The research further suggests that international students with more host national friends have higher satisfaction and success (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Voigt & Hundreiser, 2008), and they

are also more involved in the life of the institution (Voigt & Hundreiser, 2008). Yet, even though relationships with host nationals are consistently shown to be beneficial for international students, they are often difficult to form (Zhai, 2002).

- Institutional Support (coaching, mentoring, advising) and creation of a culturally inclusive environment lead to student satisfaction (Misra, Crist., & Burant, 2003; Zhang & Goodson 2011). However, students are sometimes suspicious of institutional support when experiencing difficulties and tend to seek out co-nationals “individuals from their own country” (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011, p. 282) for advice. The relationships with people who speak one’s own language and understand one’s culture can lead to greater comfort, student success, and satisfaction. However, these benefits are only a Band-Aid solution; in the long run, these relationships can serve as a barrier to integrating into the host society (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011).
- Integration and engagement in academic/ non-academic college life lead to persistence (Voigt & Hundreiser, 2008). Another important player in developing persistence is self-efficacy (Barouch-Gilbert, 2016). Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (p. 71). There are four main sources of self-efficacy. One of these according to Bandura (1997) is “Enactive Mastery Experience.” It states that if people have experience overcoming obstacles and persevering, then when encountering new challenges “they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks” (p.80). Similarly, “knowledge and skills [do] not produce high attainments if people lack self-assurance to use them well” (p. 80). Thus, intelligence alone does not guarantee success, but rather, according to Bandura, it is one's experience of success while overcoming difficulties that leads to the strength to keep going.

So, what?

Our ELP retention data suggests that students who do manage to successfully complete our program tend to perform well in their ensuing ENGL 101 and ENGL 102 courses; therefore, ELP

retention affects not only our program, but also the entire institution. In addition, international students (whether after passing ELP or placing directly into college level classes) make up a significant percentage of Cascadia's enrollment. Thus, facilitating interactions with host nationals, providing greater opportunities to integrate and engage in academic / non-academic college life, and creating a culturally inclusive environment will not only aid our ELP students, but also benefit the college as a whole.

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doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.011