

LEARNING ABOUT STUDENTS TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

What do students in college want and need from their educational experience? More importantly, do institutions of higher education respond to the wants and needs of students? These questions consider the *market concept* in higher education and relate to issues of teaching, learning, and student development. The concern is whether or not institutions are focused solely on providing teaching, a one-way type of interaction, rather than supporting learning, a two-way interaction. Consequently, it is important to understand how institutions and administrators learn about their students and how they use that knowledge to enhance the learning process and academic development of students.

This study uses economic and social/psychological perspectives of higher education and relates them to the concept of student-centeredness to address what a college knows about its students and how it uses that information. Specifically, it examines how a College of Business and Economics gathers information about its students and how it uses that information in making decisions that have an effect on the students' educational development. Rationale for this study stems from the lack of research concerning students' wants and needs in institutional decision-making.

Two questions help shape the process of inquiry: How do the administrators identify the needs and wants of students – both informally and formally? How responsive are the administrators to students' needs and wants, with regard to the students' academic development? These types of questions necessitate the design of a descriptive and exploratory study.

A case study approach was used in an attempt to understand and explain how the administrators identify information about their undergraduates and how they utilize that information in making decisions. This study uses three departments in a College of Business and Economics, and interviews were conducted with the Department Chairs of these departments and with the Dean of the College. A document review was conducted in an auxiliary function in this study for qualitative content analysis.

The interviews and documents were coded to develop themes and these themes follow Bangura's (1998) definition of student-centered to identify: (1) How the College and these three departments gather information about their students (2) How that information is disseminated and (3) How responsive the College and departments are to the information about their students' needs and wants.

Highlights of the results show the following: A disconnect exists between the mission/vision statements and the College's actions. While the College states that it addresses the needs of its students in these statements, it does not address any response to those needs nor does it use any information to identify those needs. In terms of what the College knows about its students and how it gathers that data, the College lacks a formal or systematic means of gathering of information. For example one Department Chair stated, *"Well, as far as I know, I don't think there's much known about students. I don't think the university knows a lot. We don't. The short answer is we don't do it. In terms of learning about them [students], institutional research has generally not been able to give us much more than demographic data."* Informal data gathering about students was commonly referred to in the interviews and many decisions about the students' academic development are driven by this informal information. In sum, if the College is not generating a great deal of information about its students, then they are forced to use informal data to make decisions. Also, the responsibilities of administrators limit the amount of information they gather about their students. To enhance and support the academic development of students, an institution should learn about their students, while teaching them to learn.

Bangura, Abdul Karim. (October 1998). Student Centeredness: Conceptualizing and Operationalizing It. Paper presented at the Mid-Atlantic HBCU Faculty Showcase, Washington, DC, October 16, 1998.