

May 2019

# A Front-End Analysis Study of the Perceived Correlation Between Organizational Leadership and Student Success

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## Recommended Citation

Wyatt, Kathyleen G. (2019) "A Front-End Analysis Study of the Perceived Correlation Between Organizational Leadership and Student Success," *FDLA Journal*: Vol. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fdla-journal/vol4/iss1/1>

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The purpose of this qualitative case study with a front-end analysis approach was to gather and analyze the perceptions of administrators, teachers, and students at the multicampus study site with regard to the central concept of leadership success and the correlation between organizational leadership factors and student success. Objectively, this approach was the most appropriate design in order to generate unbiased, rich, and in-depth information from those directly involved in degree programs at the study site. The researcher used an electronic survey, a focus group discussion, and face-to-face interviews to generate perceptual data about the effect of organizational leadership on student success in higher education. Because this sequential study was three-tiered, beginning with the electronic survey and adding data from the focus group and the face-to-face interviews, the triangulation of the data obtained resulted in more in-depth analysis to aid in forming themes about the research questions. The accuracy of the study increased because the information drew on multiple sources of information that informed the development of this final report, which is both accurate and credible (Creswell 2012, para. 259).

This case study is specific to our college; it was chosen because the researcher is specifically concerned with the perceived effect of our organization's leadership on student success and because our organization's leaders are seeking to increase enrollment in the four-year bachelor's degree program and are developing a leadership reorganization plan. In conjunction with the qualitative analysis and case study approach, a front-end analysis was conducted to provide you, our school's leaders, with reliable and valid information on which to base future decisions.

The researcher used language in the data-collection tool and in the focus group and individual interviews that was sensitive and respectful of varying cultures, genders, sexual orientations, ethnic groups, disabilities, and ages (Creswell, 2012). These considerations aimed

to minimize biases so the responses gathered were as authentic as possible. The survey results involved 25 participants (students, faculty, and administrators) who first completed the confidential electronic survey on-line. Of the 50 qualified study participants requested to participate in this research study, 25 responded, which provided an overall response rate of 50%. The sample is composed of 11 students (44%), five faculty members (20%), and nine administrative staff (36%).

### **Emergent Themes**

**Theme 1: Administrative leadership roles and responsibilities:** In answer to research question one: What is the perceived relationship between administrative leadership and student success?

The relationship between administrative leadership and student success was confirmed as very important according to the survey results. The perceived responsibility of administrative leadership is to provide resources and ensure all students are on the right path to success through continuous academic support and tools required to complete a degree. Academic program guidance and degree opportunity awareness as they foster a path to career success is also deemed significant in this relationship. The participants continued to express the need for specific guidance in the importance of higher education and direction on where to begin early in the enrollment period. Students expect administrators to provide timely updates on academic status and frequent communication on any outstanding documents in order to meet graduation requirements.

Leadership's level of customer service to the students sets the tone for other faculty and staff that inevitably trickles down to student success. College administrators should seek to hire faculty that are competent in the subject matter who also have practical experience, which will

open the door to a more relevant and innovative curriculum. Improvement of the relationship of college administration to student success perceivably entails the implementation of effective data-based policies and procedures focused on student advancement; this will provide vision for the college to ensure continued growth and success for all, using resources for ongoing professional development of administrative staff and faculty, and making connections with community industry partners.

**Theme 2: The survival kit requirements on the voyage to student success:** In response to research question two: What is the perceived relationship between instructional leadership and student success?

The overall response of more than one-half of survey participants reflected a definite correlation between instructional leadership and student success. Although a small number of participants stated some instructors are not confident and knowledgeable in course curricula, this was not the overall view of a majority of the survey respondents. According to the survey results, students expect an instructional support system comprised of knowledgeable instructors with the ability to clearly communicate and teach the objectives of the course, provide academic guidance, and offer words of encouragement. In correlation, instructional staff should prepare students for life after college through mentoring, the use of innovative teaching methodologies, and the use of technology in the classroom to enhance learning.

Because a majority of the four-year bachelor degree programs are taught on-line the opportunity for teacher and student interaction have been narrowed; this leaves some students feeling like a conveyer belt on an assembly line with instructors dumping knowledge on students. Instructors provide tools for success and hold significant influence with regard to learning, acceptance, relationship building, feedback, retention, and student completion. The

survey suggested instructors should ensure course requirements are being met; they should also spend more time with students than administrators by utilizing instructional time, office hours, and campus engagement opportunities to foster student interaction and success.

Poor leadership will always have a negative impact on students. As a result of the perceived weakness of the administrative head of academics, students feel they have not been given sufficient customer service when faced with a concern. The future of the correlative relationship between organizational leadership and student success at this study site should involve the expansion of teaching methodologies for various learning styles and the use of technology in the classroom to enable each student to reach her or his maximum potential.

Distance learning (on-line programs) are a major component of our bachelor degree programs. The associated faculty are perceived successful when ensuring enrolled students are provided with clear syllabi detailing the expectations of courses in conjunction with the use of blackboard for ongoing clarity and assistance throughout the course and continuous feedback from submitted assignments. For additional student engagement, instructors should become more involved in learning communities and encourage students to participate and get involved in service learning as well in order to put theory to practice, build self-awareness, demonstrate civic engagement, and acquire a holistic approach to the educational experience. More specifically, the Associate Deans should collaborate with other faculty members to define course requirements in depth and patronize the curriculum services office. Future collaboration opportunities should include a lower instructional cap on the maximum number of students enrolled in a course, consistency in academic advising, and an increase in the availability of instructors and academic advisors.

**Theme 3: The perception of student success factors and intervention process: The**

third research question was, “What leadership factors are perceived to be directly and positively correlated with student success?”

Leadership’s involved support of students in creating a memorable and knowledgeable experience on campus is perceived as the goal of the positive correlation between leadership and student success. The survey participants indicated there should be an increased focus on students as individuals and not just numbers. Providing the right path to success, creating student success programs, and leadership support of such indicated programs are a few of several correlated factors expressed in the survey narratives. According to the survey results, a majority of the emphasis of school administrators has been placed on data-driven indicators of student success versus the engagement and interactive opportunities that would give the students a sense of commitment to the college and help them complete their designated degree program.

It was perceived by the participants that sometimes organizational structure alone is a deterrent to student success. Several of the courses are too short for the curriculum requirements and impede on the quality of instruction and the student’s ability to learn and retain the desired information. Innovation in organizing curriculum, allowing instructors more flexibility in working with nontraditional students, peer connection, and early warning intervention, and more time for remediation, tutoring, and time management should be factored into the process of structuring staff, faculty, and administration in higher education. Student leadership should also work collaboratively with college leadership to increase and enhance student involvement and feedback through activities, seminars, e-mail blasts, and town hall style meetings with pertinent leaders. Overall, the survey results indicate leadership should place extreme emphasis on the following factors in student success:

- Understanding the college mission

- Providing support to the student admission and enrollment processes
- Enhancing student satisfaction and persistence
- Increasing community support for the college
- Fostering a sense of belonging (“My college” or “Our College”)
- Increasing funding opportunities

However, it is not the sole responsibility of the organizational leadership to provide academic support to the students. Students must take advantage of and show initiative in their learning process by applying the tools that are given during their tenure in the program. Leadership is not responsible for enabling students, but they should be used as a source of encouragement that will promote a culture of self-efficacy and personal responsibility for students.

**Theme 4: Distributed responsibility among leadership and the opportunity to enhance student success:** The fourth research question asked the participants would the development and implementation of a shared leadership development program perceivably correlate to student success directly and positively?

Although one-fourth of the survey participants were not sure if shared leadership exists or if it would assist in promoting student success within the organization, a majority of the respondents stated that it did exist in some form and that it should continually be pursued in future leadership development and reorganization efforts. According to the respondents, the information regarding leadership roles in their education is disseminated primarily when special guests come to classrooms to explain what is going on within the organization. Numerous respondents expressed shared leadership would be better than the current organizational structure because it brings a group of people with different ideas and methods together, working toward

the same goal. Additionally, it would be a good idea to implement shared leadership within the organization to prevent the perception of an organization that does not care about the students and cares only about the money that the students are paying for a higher education in hopes of landing a good job. Currently with regard to the colleges' reorganization process, the perception is that the focus is on the organization of schools within all of the college campuses that would eliminate campuses working in silos and competing with other campuses within the same college; quasi-shared oversight among leadership would be a unifying component. Participants believe that shared leadership is a new model for the organization, but it is too soon to comment on its effectiveness; in the interim, enrollment, GPAs, and degree completions are declining.

Responses regarding student, staff, and faculty interactions were mostly positive; responses showed that participants felt that interactions occurred regularly. A few survey respondents did not feel shared leadership was in place or in process due to impending budget cuts resulting in the termination of many well respected professors and significant academic administrative changes; this left them feeling unsure if this restructuring was being done to assist in student success or merely to save money.

**Theme 5: Collaborative opportunities and perceptual overview.** This theme triangulated the data as it correlates to the central research question of the perceived relationship between shared organizational leadership and student success?

As stated earlier, the interactions between students and faculty and staff are perceived as being mostly positive. The survey narratives suggest staff should be working for their love of academia versus a paycheck. Also some students are too dependent on leadership to hold their hands and guide them through the completion process without putting in a valid amount of effort themselves. Students should be proactive in order to handle the stress of higher education much

easier.

The respondents indicated that the opportunity to actively participate in this research study was enlightening and encouraged all participants to be more successful in school. The staff and administrative respondents anticipated that the data collected and associated research might positively contribute to the literature regarding student success from a leadership perspective as well as to their individual practices. Suggestions for improvement in collaboration included goal post check-ins; once a student reaches certain points in the degree-completion process, someone should reach out to them to offer confirmation of attainments, answer questions, offer additional assistance. Another suggestion was to formally develop and implement peer mentoring and networking opportunities among students and faculty in similar degree programs.

In summary, most participants perceived that there is a direct correlation between successful, shared organizational leadership and student success. Leadership provides the structure, processes, funding, grants and priorities for the organization that affect student success measures. When students feel the faculty honestly wants them to succeed, it is inspiring. Poor leadership equals poor education, and good leadership equals good education. It all trickles down.

### **Future Direction of Research**

The future direction of research on student success measures and the correlation to organizational leadership can be studied in the implications and applications of ideal distance learning in higher education, machine learning techniques designed to improve retention, and 360 degree learning.

Distance learning is a growing phenomenon in higher education, higher education

organizations are looking for innovative ways to blend equipment, technology, and academic curriculum in a symposium that will enhance student-to-student and student-to-staff collaboration. As an institution of higher learning increase their distance learning opportunities, there must be a continued focus on the correlation between student success, faculty, students, and the use of technology by everyone engaged. The ultimate experience is to make distance learning experiences closely mimic the face-to-face classroom experience. Student loyalty has been shown to be impacted by satisfaction and institutional reputation, the perceived value. The increased demand for on-line course offerings in colleges and universities places additional demands on technology, professor-student communication, and virtual pedagogy. These variables, in collaboration with the demand for on-line courses, effect student retention and overall graduation rates. On-line courses increase the perceived value of attending an institution of higher learning due to flexibility in completing the course requirements. Organizations that continuously monitor the value of on-line courses an assessment must implement a plan that continuously monitors the programs to ensure quality objectives and outcomes were achieved. A quality electronic learning experience will promote positive change to enhance the learning experience of on-line students (Kilburn, Kilburn, & Cates, 2014).

Machine learning techniques can also be used a scientific retention tool in higher education. Machine learning uses patterns found in statistical data supporting student attrition to detect patterns and changes in academic progress that correlate with an increased risk of leaving school (Delen, 2010). Delen noted in a related study, that student retention is greatly determined by the level of consistent quality interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. This correlation is most prevalent in first-generation college students and facilitated by a seamless transition into college enrollment and a positive connection with college personnel. The data driven models

created are formulated to predict retention probability at the end of the first enrollment semester allowing time for the appropriate staff to put individual retention intervention resources in place prior to the subsequent semester (Delen, 2010).

In promoting a cohesive college experience for students, staff, and faculty as experienced in shared organizational leadership models, Tee and Ahmed (2014), used the 360 degree feedback system in a holistic manner for the purpose of improving student learning. The system designed to provide a continuous collaborative feedback venue in instruction and learning. The 360 degree feedback system places primary focus on the communication and engagement of all the stakeholders in student success. The system embraces congeniality among faculty as it lessens the image of teachers as the unquestionable authority and creates collaborative learning among teachers and students. Collegially the system encourages feedback by leveraging cooperation among stakeholders engaged in the learning process to support the organization as a conglomerate organization. A holistic integrative approach, as used in 360 degree learning, provides opportunities for innovation teaching learning systems. Another tool for effective learning comes about through meaningful process, such as highly scrutinized peer reviews among teachers, designed to increase academic instructional engagement (Iqbal, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the data collection in this research study supported by literature reviewed on the theoretical framework of the front-end analysis correlation study and the answers to the research questions, this researcher formed several conclusions and recommendations for the institution of higher education in northern Florida with emphasis on improving student success in the school's Bachelor's Degree Program. College administrators should not underscore the non-traditional student's attrition in college admissions and retention, resulting in the feeling of lack

of support and the need to seek academic attention at another institution. The increase in distance learning opportunities in higher education will require the mastery of virtual engagement and retention methods in order to retain students and promote successful outcome measures. *Students and educators can benefit from more collaborative and immerse learning proportioned between classroom discussions, practical applications, and peer-to-peer teaching.* According to the American Federation of Teachers (2011), “*Accountability needs to flow naturally from clearly delineated responsibilities; including the responsibility faculty and staff have in the learning process.*”

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