

Chapter 2

Empathy First: Refurbishing a Teams' Approach to Student Success

Randi Korn

Lesley University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how the promotion of empathy in an academic support unit at a higher education institution enabled the design thinking process to generate programs designed around student retention. Empathy empowered staff to understand retention as a complex construct called a “wicked problem,” which is a deep, structural, and pervasive issue. Priority was placed on the development of empathy among the team members to build cohesion and trust and develop deeper understanding of the complexity within the student experience in the first year of university. The results of the process were improved team cohesion, stronger commitment to student success, and reorganization of the academic support unit.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, Charlie Rose from *60 Minutes* interviewed the co-founder of IDEO, David Kelley (CBS News, 2013), who described how design thinking included human behavior, storytelling, and collaboration as tools for innovation. Kelley demonstrated how IDEO solved complex social problems through design thinking to improve the lives of people globally. For instance, he gave the example of how a swivel chair on wheels in an elementary classroom demonstrated how a well-designed chair could hold students' backpacks and their attention by supporting the needs of young children to fidget while not disrupting the classroom (CBS News, 2013). The implication is that the designers understood the many aspects of students' needs for school success. Therefore, the question addressed in this chapter is as follows: How could the design thinking process Kelley used to improve outcomes for children improve how staff in an academic support unit perceive the complex needs for student success in higher education?

Design thinking is inherently human-centered, empathetic, and creative in its approach to solving complex problems and is, therefore, a compelling model for improving student success. According to

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7768-4.ch002

Empathy First

Brown and Katz (2009), the key elements of design thinking are observation, empathy, brainstorming, piloting, and iteration. IDEO describes design thinking as

a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success. (IDEO Design Thinking, n.d., para. 1).

For decades, improving student success outcomes in higher education has been the focus of researchers and administrators. Design thinking supports higher education leaders in moving away from traditional modes of processing information to considering how to culturally adapt standards of success and develop new ways to support students. This chapter explores the complex crossroads of intellectual, financial, and cultural obstacles related to improving fall-to-fall retention and how developing staff empathy can mitigate obstacles to student success. Retention is defined as “the percentage of first-time undergraduate students who return to the same institution the following fall” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020, para. 1).

RETENTION, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND WICKED PROBLEMS

Retention and Social Justice

Measuring and improving student retention combines a long history of scholarship, starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the position that students must assimilate to the values, culture, and disciplines of their institution (Chickering, 1969; Tinto, 1975). During this period, it was the student's responsibility to make changes within themselves to be successful in the academy. In response, scholars developed constructs such as engagement, assimilation, and motivation to measure how well students absorbed the norms and values of the institution. As enrollment and diversity increased in the late 1970s, institutions saw diminishing graduation rates and began developing programs to teach students how to assimilate to and engage with their institutions. Programs such as first-year seminars and orientations taught students how to integrate into a higher education culture. The burden to adapt was on the student.

During the late 1990s, early research gave way to a multicultural lens that identified that students have their feet in two worlds: their culture and the institution's culture. Through the multicultural lens, adjusting to higher education required funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2001) or the values and beliefs inherent in students' cultural identities and the impact of socio-economic status on academic preparedness (Braxton, 2000; Dowd et al., 2011; Rendon et al., 2000; Tinto, 2007). However, students were still responsible for balancing these two worlds.

More recent work on student success frames retention through an equity and social justice lens, which assumes that students must adapt to higher education norms. This lens focuses on how institutional structures or policies inhibit the success of BIPOC, first-generation, and marginalized students (Kendi, 2019; McNair et al., 2020). Higher education must restructure institutions to be equity-minded by highlighting the importance of the systemic social, financial, and political inequities that BIPOC, Disabled, LGBTQA+, and other marginalized students experience to improve student success outcomes. Millea et al. (2018) provided a framework for examining how these competing constraints impact retention by organizing student success factors into three categories: institutional, financial, and individual.

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