Student conduct and the potential for interruption: student success and retention

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Abstract

Student progress, success and retention remain a central focus for higher education in Australia. Student conduct and incivility markedly impact progress, success and retention. The University of Newcastle has developed a proactive and responsive framework targeting student conduct to make explicit expected conduct and a supportive framework to develop civility. This initiative targets non-academic misconduct and values the importance of: a positive framing of student conduct; collaborative divisional staff partnerships to ensure the support of academic, professional, social and personal dimensions; an educational process complemented by ethical modelling of just-in-time targeted communication of policy and process; appropriate coupling of policy and practice ensuring means and ends; and a risk assessment and triage process to ensure a safe and supportive campus. The challenge is to promote a culture that makes explicit behavioural expectations and a process that responds appropriately to misconduct to ensure student success, progression and retention.

Introduction

Student progress, success and retention remain a central focus for higher education in Australia. This focus is underpinned by research that considers the individual, social and organisational aspects of the student experience to effectively direct, focus, nurture, engage, connect and value students, particularly as linked to academic, professional, social and personal dimensions (RP Group, 2014). Universities need to consider student success in relation to student conduct, academic progress and retention as student misconduct can substantially impact the student experience, interrupt student progress and result in attrition. To support appropriate student conduct and the provision of a safe campus, innovative and integrated approaches are needed that consider the academic, professional, social and personal dimensions of the students within an institutional context (Triventi, 2013).

Recent strategic decisions by the University of Newcastle (UoN) have emphasised the importance of student support as a collaborative endeavour to ensure a proactive approach to student non-academic misconduct. Thus, promoting appropriate conduct and providing a safe and supportive environment has involved the partnerships between fifteen units across UoN Divisions. These units include the Offices of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic (DVC-A), Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching (PVCL&T), Dean of Students (DoS), Campus Care, Legal Office, Graduate Studies, Complaints, Health Service, Counselling Service, Human Resource Services, Student Support and Equity, UoN Global, UoN Student Living, and Security. These partnerships are housed within a revised policy framework locating misconduct or incivility within a supportive, educational context rather than a punitive one,

and risk assessment as an early intervention strategy to mitigate risk and facilitate retention through targeted and timely communications with students, staff and the wider community.

Campus partnerships to promote student support

The campus environment is a key factor in student retention. Johnson et al (2014) contends that a safe and supportive campus and 'comfortable interactions' are linked to retention, stress levels and the persistence of students. Whilst current data about the incidence of non-academic misconduct across Australian universities is not readily available Alkandari (2011) reported an increase in the incidence in incivility in North America. This emerging initiative at UoN is located within a context of breaches of the UoN Code of Conduct and the need of students to feel safe to attain academic success and retention. The UoN Code of Conduct delineates the expected values of all UoN community interactions, which include: honesty, trust, respect, accountability and fairness. Foster (2014) correlates student attrition with doubting, and highlights the importance of student confidence in a civil community where they are safe, supported, focused, valued, connected, directed, nurtured and engaged (RP Group, 2014).

To promote a safe and supportive campus environment this initiative acknowledges the complexity of student life and the additive effects impacting student success (Zeisman, 2012). It seeks a holistic intervention to move beyond an issue driven approach to a student-centred case management approach that is responsive and educative for those in breach of the UoN Code of Conduct. The approach also proactively works to reassure the campus community of a safe and supportive campus. The partnerships across the divisions are 'student-oriented' to ensure, as recommended by Lee (2012) the academic, social, personal and professional student dimensions are considered.

At UoN, the Office of the DVC-A (ODVCA) provides institutional coordination of the student conduct process, with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) having the delegated authority to make decisions regarding student conduct. The ODVCA prepares comprehensive briefings on referred matters, integrating academic and non-academic issues into a single assessment report and then works with the DoS and Campus Care Coordinator (CCC) to ensure the complex dimensions of a student are supported with an immediate early intervention process.

The DoS works to ensure that the academic progress of the students involved in any misconduct incident is supported in partnership with the relevant university academic staff and appropriate academic decision makers. The DoS also supports the student/s to ensure that they are provided with the appropriate policy and process support in engaging in the Student Conduct Rule process. The CCC ensures campus safety and supports the student through assessing risk of harm to self and others, as well as referring the student to internal and external support services as required, to ensure a holistic approach to general wellbeing and student success. . These staff are the 'face' of the misconduct process for students, working together to ensure students are supported in a timely manner. The importance of this integrated support is noted in the research of Cornelius and Wood (2012) and Zeisman (2012) who report the disadvantage and impact on success for students that are unfamiliar with university processes. Furthermore, the case-management approach, addressed the concerns raised by the RP group (2014) that a 'lack of academic support, the absence of someone who cared about their success, and insufficient financial assistance as reasons not to continue their studies' (p.91). The DoS and CCC 'triage' the student, and their needs, to ensure success via an early intervention 'just-in-time' focus. The Office of the DVC-A liaises with the DoS and CCC to monitor interventions in terms of UoN policy and prepare all formal correspondence. Staff of all three of these offices engage in case management meetings as needed. Outcomes support the work

of Hill (2010), who notes that for students under a great deal of stress specific forms of support from multiple resources influence retention, and Altmiller (2012), who reports that prompt responses that model a civil and respectful manner are a critical component in educating a student about the inappropriateness of maladaptive behaviours.

The 'first-port-of-call' student process is complemented by a 'behind the scenes' partnership of divisions that is twofold (as is shown in Figure 1 below). First, the relevant Faculty or Division engages case management meetings and referral, and second, the Behavioural BRG risk assesses fortnightly. The BRG uses a risk assessment instrument but recognises the research conducted by Fazel et al. (2012) that the predictive capacity of these tools is limited and thus must be supplemented by the expertise of cross divisional staff and refer concerns to the DVC-A for action and support from the DoS and CCC.

Figure 1: The divisional partnerships in the triage of student conduct

Policy support

An outcome of UON's review of the Student Misconduct Rule was a more streamlined, clear and supportive policy, which was renamed the Student Conduct Rule. This change reflects a shift from a punitive to a supportive educational process in managing conduct issues. The review also integrated processes around the management of 'Enforced Leave', providing more transparency in dealing with complex behaviour outside the definition of 'misconduct' but that had a significant negative impact on student progress and the campus environment.

Eifert (2014) reported that a key reason that staff do not address conduct issues is due to unclear process and a lack of support in trying to utilise the process. Thus the procedure was simplified and academic, non-academic and research conduct included in one document. The intent of the policy in placing the DVC-A as central is also so that information gathered on trends of incivility could be targeted in strategies to ensure a safer and supportive campus. Faucher, et al (2015) report that most policies target student conduct but relatively few address the prevention of unacceptable behaviours. Thus the rule was amended to have more of a focus on educational outcomes, with decision-makers pointed in the first instance toward counselling and education programs, such as 'Wise U' and 'Consent Matters'.

Misconduct as an educational opportunity: Wise U Ethics and Respect program

The Wise U Ethics and Respect online resource seeks to promote appropriate student behaviour in UoN. Lovitts (in Hill, 2010) noted students are less likely to leave if they internalise the values, of the organisation. WiseU focuses on student's personal ethical framework by: encouraging active engagement in ethical decision-making processes when confronted with ethical dilemmas; supporting students in awareness and ownership of the UoN Code of

Conduct; and to provide pathways for performance for students concerning ethical decision making. Currently the Wise U initiative is accessed by students who are in breach of the UoN Code of Conduct, however it will be available in 2017 for all students. This provides an educative process that demonstrates the expectations of a safe and supportive university environment, which becomes increasingly important in a diverse student population where expectations of behaviour can remain assumed. Elkington (in Bryson 2014) notes that students are 'producers' of their context and thus ownership of the values of UoN can promote a supportive and safe campus. Furthermore, Altmiller (2012) reports benefits to students in introducing a code of ethics to model and espouse civility and standards expected in their prospective professions.

Impact of the Initiatives

The review of the BRG and related processes has already had a marked impact on the responsive and proactive goals of UoN in relation to student conduct. Students who are in breach of conduct are now supported and educated in behavioural expectations explicitly and report changed behaviour. The early intervention, communication and case management focus across divisions has been well received by students and staff, noting that there is some additional work required to improve active engagement by staff with the UoN Code of Conduct. Although a cultural shift has begun, better communication and promotion is continually required to ensure staff model positive behaviour , and that these behaviours are not simply assumed. In some cases, there is continued tension around whether student conduct is a personal or an institutional matter. However, students who engage in the conduct process note a newfound sense of ethical framing and the importance of themselves and others participating in a safe and supportive environment. There are also cases emerging of students remaining at UoN noting they would have left without the support of this process and their reassurance of a respectful and safe environment in which to study. Research will continue into the impact of these initiatives on student awareness of a safe and supportive environment, reducing student misconduct, and encouraging retention.

Conclusion

The continual challenge of this initiative is to maintain a constructive and positive lens on an area in universities that is often not discussed or well understood. This initiative seeks to change this posture to recognise the importance of a safe and supportive campus environment for student success and retention and thus the need to make explicit the values of behaviour. This moves student conduct into a transparent space where students can be supported to understand cultural expectations where they are encouraged in everyday interactions to be honest, trustworthy, respectful, accountable and fair. If they are in breach of these values, they can engage in timely interactions that seek a supported change of behaviour in an institution that communicates their value and applauds the desire to change. UoN's approach demonstrates to students that safety and support is of utmost importance. Further, our educative approach to student conduct locates student support in the context of behaviour expectations as core university business. Whilst this work is founded in substantial research, the tension identified by Bromley & Powell (2012) of a possible growing gap between policy and practice – and means and ends – will require ongoing scrutiny. Continued research into the impact of this approach will be needed to test its veracity and reported impact on campus culture.

Key Discussion Questions

1. Could you describe examples of good practice to encourage student conduct in your context which has positively impacted upon student success?
2. What do you consider are the perceived barriers to encouraging student conduct that engenders a safe and supportive campus culture?
3. What processes of gathering information have you used (e.g. analytics) to identify any lack of student and staff engagement and to prompt interventions in the area of student conduct.

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