

Relationships keep students on campus

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“College life is about more than just going to class,” Todd Misener, director of Western Kentucky University’s Health and Fitness Lab, noted in a recent front page story by Aaron Mudd. “It’s an opportunity for students to explore, learn about themselves, develop their own personal identity.”

Translation: College is not just the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it is a transformative experience.

Student attrition and completion rates are influenced more by social integration than by academic preparation and support, the advising process, or pedagogical proficiency. Note a key finding from Misener’s own study:

“First year full-time students who participated in two or more different Student Affairs programs had a 17.5 percent higher fall to fall retention rate than other full-time students.”

The implications are game-changing, if educators can learn to overcome some inherently self-serving biases and think outside their increasingly claustrophobic intellectual boxes.

The empirical research on this is definitive: Most students who drop out do so for reasons having nothing to do with academics; i.e., they do not “flunk out.”

They leave because they do not feel connected to their peers or to the institution.

At its core, education has always been about relationships. This is as true today as it was in ancient Greece when Socrates first sought to enlighten his fellow citizens.

By the way, this is precisely why traditional colleges will not be replaced by their virtual counterparts, particularly for undergraduates.

Much to the chagrin of several educational entrepreneurs and their investors, MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses – will never supplant the brick-and-mortar institutions that have been the vanguard of higher education for centuries.

“Students who feel connected to a university environment from a social perspective stay,” Misener concludes.

The writing is on the wall. It’s time for colleges and universities to re-think their entire approach to keeping students on campus.

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