

Reframing BIT as a Tool for Retention

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Abstract

In a time of decreasing resources and increased need to retain students, Behavioral Intervention Teams (BITs) may be well served by focusing on how their teams are contributing to student retention. This article highlights how BITs at Oklahoma regional institutions are contributing to student retention, and recommends ways in which teams might better communicate their stories to the larger campus community to promote their teams and secure much-needed funding for team efforts.

Introduction

Throughout the past decade, state funding for two- and four-year educational institutions has declined by nearly \$9 billion, resulting in decreased faculty and course offerings, increased tuition, and cuts to student services (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017). Institutions also face more competition due to changes in the higher education marketplace, as students have more choice regarding how and where they pursue their studies (Sousa, 2015). Since recruiting new students can be expensive, retaining enrolled students has become more important than ever (Sousa, 2015). Yet decreases in funding have made it difficult for Behavioral Intervention Teams to secure funding for their teams. As a result, BITs are beginning to focus on their contribution to student retention as a way to make the case for much-needed resources (Self, 2017).

Participants in this study of Oklahoma schools generally believed others in the campus community were largely unaware of the severity of issues the team was handling, and had no idea of the time-consuming nature of the BIT's work. Additionally, none of the participants reported that their BITs had dedicated team budgets. BIT work, often taken on by staff members who are already spread thin, seemed to be an "invisible hat," or an unseen "other duty as assigned," and this made the team particularly vulnerable to being overlooked when budgets were being determined. Without dedicated funding, teams reported struggling to train both team members and the campus community, market the team, and purchase equipment and/or software. At the same time teams described growing caseloads and a widening scope of responsibility (Self, 2017).

So, what is a BIT to do when team efforts and the team's impact on the campus community go largely unnoticed by others outside the team? BITs serve as resources for the campus community, facilitate campus safety, and provide resources to students who are struggling with a wide range of issues. It is important for teams to share how their work contributes to the goals of the institution, including student retention. In fact, in times of tightening budgets and competing demands, the challenge for teams trying to succeed within a framework of shrinking institutional resources may be to quantify and more widely promote how their work contributes to student retention.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to address team member perceptions of Behavioral Intervention Team effectiveness, functioning, resources, and impact at regional public institutions in the state of Oklahoma. Twelve team members from four regional universities in Oklahoma participated in the study. The research offers a better

understanding of team functioning so that team members and/or university leaders may better equip BITs to positively contribute to student safety and success.

Literature Review

To better describe how retention relates to team efforts, it is important to understand the purpose of a Behavioral Intervention Team and the importance of early identification and proactive intervention.

Purpose of a BIT

By design, Behavioral Intervention Teams gather information, analyze that information in a systematic way, and provide interventions and follow-up services aimed at keeping the campus community safe and at helping students be successful (Sokolow, Lewis, Schuster, & Swinton, 2014). Teams are a central point of contact for the campus community to report behaviors of concern and should carry the authority necessary to intervene appropriately. A modern BIT is a multi-disciplinary team whose efforts can have a direct impact on student success and can save lives, money, and time, thereby impacting an institution's bottom line (Sokolow et al., 2014).

Early identification and proactive intervention are key to BIT success and student success. Following the tragic campus shooting at Virginia Tech., Behavioral Intervention Teams were formed to prevent future acts of targeted violence at institutions of higher education. As such, teams work to cultivate college and university cultures where reporting and referrals are common so that teams may intervene early with individuals who may be struggling with a variety of issues, from depression to homelessness to thoughts of violence. When concerns are identified early, teams are able to proactively engage with the individuals in question to provide the support resources needed to better navigate and overcome their challenges. The goal of intervention is to prevent further negative behavioral escalation and increase the chances of a successful outcome. Even when team efforts result in the removal of students from campus, doing so often increases the likelihood that others may then continue their studies in a safer environment, and many times also provides a plan to help the removed students transition out of the institution safely (Randazzo & Plummer, 2009; Van Brunt, 2012; Sokolow et al., 2014; and Sokolow & Lewis, 2009).

Method

Through the use of a collective case-study qualitative design, the purpose of this study was to describe Behavioral Intervention Teams from the perspective of 12 team members serving at four regional universities in Oklahoma (three members per team participated). As

suggested by Hancock and Algozzine (2011), this design collected and combined information gathered from a variety of sources to better describe a complex phenomenon — in this case, BITs at regional institutions in Oklahoma.

Participants and Setting

In accordance with Creswell's (2009) five-phase plan for qualitative methodology, selecting participants involved both choosing research sites and participants at each site. The following sections describe how this was accomplished.

Selection of Research Sites: Homogeneous sampling was used to choose the research sites. This was defined by Creswell (2009) as selection "based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (p. 216). Four of 10 regional institutions were selected for this study. All participating institutions had BITs that had been functioning for at least three years. The selected institutions represented four regions in Oklahoma.

Identification and Selection of Participants: Participants at the four institutions were selected using purposeful sampling. Three team members from each team who had served for a minimum of three years and represented student affairs, mental health services, and/or law enforcement (police department) were selected.

Data Collection

To complete this study, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted, along with an analysis of institutional BIT websites, policies, and instruments/assessment tools used by the teams. Analytic memos were used to group data into themes and categories as well as to minimize bias. Furthermore, an open-ended interview protocol was created, piloted, and implemented, which allowed for both consistency and flexibility in the interview process (Hancock and Algozzine, 2011). Participants were given pseudonyms that corresponded with their institutional functional area; Thus, student affairs representatives were referred to as "SA," mental health representatives were referred to as "MH," and law enforcement (police department) representatives were referred to as "PD." The institutional pseudonyms, Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Gamma were used along with the functional area pseudonyms. So, the student affairs participant from institution "Alpha" was referred to as "Alpha SA," and so forth.

Before interviews began, a pilot test was conducted, and before each interview, an initial standardized phone interview was completed to gather demographic information and build rapport with the participants. Finally, member checks were conducted following each interview.

Data Analysis

Yin's (2016) five-phase data analysis model was used and included: 1) compiling or collecting the data; 2) disassembling the data by use of coding and analytic memos; 3) reassembling and theming the data; 4) interpreting the results; and 5) drawing conclusions. Data were compared and contrasted with each other and held up against findings from existing literature to interpret and describe findings.

Findings

This study unveiled two main points related to student retention. One was that the highly individualized efforts of teams to help students succeed were working. However, teams were struggling to foster early communication and to communicate their retention successes to the larger campus community.

Team Impact

In terms of retention, Gamma PD expressed his perceptions about how his team was contributing to or impacting student success by saying:

"Look at a kid who is a student today versus a student who was a student 10 years ago, before this team was started. How was that student being handled? Would that student 10 years ago have been able to finish school? I would tell you that today that number is higher. I can't give you a number, but I can just tell you that we'll throw whatever we have at them, trying to manage enrollment by saving students ... I think you have a greater likelihood of coming through a crisis, a personal crisis, and that can be anywhere from a mental health issue, [if] you're a victim of rape, whatever it would be. We're going to help you in ways that we didn't a decade ago; really, in ways we didn't five years ago, [or] four years ago. I think we're getting better as we move forward. Ultimately, the campus is safer, but individually, the impacts are that the students, faculty, and staff, can be saved."

Even when participants didn't initially appreciate outreach efforts to address behaviors of concern, participants perceived that many students came to see the benefit of the interventions and were retained as students. Even when teams removed students from campus through suspensions and/or other interventions, they felt that removing one person sometimes allowed others to be retained by mitigating the removed person's negative impacts on others in the campus community.

Alpha PD reported: "I think kids would slip through the system, fall through the cracks, and we'd lose those kids [if we didn't have the team]."

Beta MH added: "I think it's just as important as enrollment, just as important as filling the residence halls ... I mean, they are here to get an education, and this is just one piece that is going to help them along in doing that."

Delta PD said this when asked whether or not teams were needed: "I've seen the direct impact we have on these kids. There are many success stories that wouldn't be success stories if it weren't for our involvement."

Delta SA noted:

"For fall, we really felt good. We went back and looked at: Did they retain into next semester? [and] Did they make their grades? And, we've had good results. I felt like we were able to intervene early enough to get some results. I felt like we were able to intervene early enough to get some people back on track, and those who didn't need to stay at the institution, we took out as well, who needed to go. But, I — we — felt like we were really successful ... I can think of three people that actually graduated ... and we felt really good about that. I mean, that's what we wanted to happen. It wasn't a permanent issue for them, but at that time, at that moment, they really needed the intervention, and we were able to produce it, and they graduated."

Delta PD said:

"I have seen cases come up that, on the initial view, look like a lost cause, and then you see them walk across the stage. From the onset, you go in and look at the background and history and what all is going on in their lives, and then you set them down and go through [the intervention], and they walk across the stage in December. It's a very fulfilling thing. We had a student from over west that had a long criminal record. He was going to an off-site campus location. He had a lot of external factors, family problems, access to drugs, and a lot of issues. They [the BIT] made arrangements for him, he rented a house from the university, got him out of that environment, and [he] seemed to do a lot better over here. We had some rocky points, but he excelled. He walked across the stage last December. I initially never would have thought that was going to happen, but it was a success story."

Gamma SA said his team was able to retain most of the students who were referred, and Alpha SA described the following incident:

"I think I may have told you that I got a call that somebody had cut their wrists in the bathtub, in the apartments by the Wesley Center. Well, there are apartments all around the Wesley Center. And, they said they think the door was unlocked, but they were out of town and couldn't get there. And, they hung up before

anyone could say what apartment, whatever. So, within about five minutes, there were four police department officers and five campus safety officers, and every counselor, and me, just going door to door, and we found her."

Because of their efforts, this student was, by all definitions, saved. All participants involved in the study told similar stories about their own institutions.

Communication

Repeatedly, retention emerged during the course of these interviews as a measure of effectiveness, a team goal, and a necessity for proving the value of teams to administration. Even so, participants recognized that they needed to do more to effectively (and quantitatively) communicate their successes and impact. Efforts by team members to talk about retention during the interviews seemed tied to efforts to "speak the language" of administrative priorities — especially when competing for limited financial resources. Participants believed that their contributions to this shared goal were not fully understood by others on campus. Additionally, they seemed to want to be acknowledged as much for their contribution to student success as they perceived others on campus had been.

However, the ways in which BITs could contribute to student retention were sometimes poorly received by the campus community, and team members struggled with how to better communicate a message that would be more widely received. Gamma MH put it this way:

"I struggle sometimes in some of those systems. Like our [student strategies class] ... they wrote their own book, [but] there's nothing in there about managing their [student's] mental health. I find that odd ... so, I think there's a disconnect. But I don't know why, and I can't seem to figure that out ... [I've sent out emails to faculty saying] here are some things we are doing this year that might help. And, probably eight responded ... We are saying we can support you. Not everybody bites like that, and I don't know why."

While the need to tie their efforts to retention seemed to be a concept that all teams understood and worked towards, they were still trying to determine how to get their retention message heard. Adding to the frustration was a desire for referrals to be communicated earlier, while there was still time for the team to intervene. For instance, Gamma MH said:

"On the referral side, I think we are missing students who could use some of the services. And, I don't make a lot of waves about that because we're full ... But, if we can intervene earlier that would be helpful."

Beta MH agreed that his BIT could also be better at retaining students with earlier interventions and/or better collaboration with other institutional early alert systems. However, a double-edged sword seemed to come up time and again: participants both wanted more referrals, yet also feared that they would be unable to adequately serve an influx of referrals due to limited staff and resources.

Recommendations

To learn more about how BITs can contribute to campus retention, administrators might consider pulling BIT members into larger retention conversations and/or adding BIT members to retention committees or other institutional retention efforts. BIT members, through the nature of their work, may be able to deepen the understanding of what is contributing to the success (or failures) of students, and better inform decision-making. Team leaders may also want to explore partnerships with faculty and staff tied to early alert and/or orientation courses to strengthen the understanding of how teams can partner with and strengthen efforts. Participants shared that at times, reporting systems for behaviors of concern and academic early alert systems could be competing and/or underutilized. Partnerships could allow for conversations about how to better align and maximize these tools.

Also, BITs may consider generating reports for administrators consisting of quantitative and qualitative data and trends. Teams may have the ability to present aggregated data about students' core issues, such as drug/alcohol issues, mental health concerns, medical issues, and/or family emergency information that other tools are unable to extract. For example, institutional data may tell you that a student's GPA has fallen and that the student has a business office/bursar hold, but it may not be able to tell you why. Teams may be able to paint a more descriptive picture of the types of issues preventing student success at their institution.

Finally, it is still unclear, quantitatively, to what extent teams are contributing to student retention. More quantitative research data is needed to provide a more complete picture.

Summary

As college and university resources decrease and competition for institutional dollars grows, BITs may consider reframing team efforts to focus on how their teams contribute to retention as a strategy for promoting the good work they are doing and for securing much-needed funding for their teams. The teams involved in this study were beginning to articulate their team impact and positive contribution to student retention, but they were challenged by how to quantify and communicate both their needs and their contributions to the larger campus community.

One strategy was to use end-of-semester, or end-of-year, reports to highlight the number of students referred to the team, reasons for the referrals, and interventions employed. The number of students retained to the next semester (or beyond), the number who graduated, and the number who were removed from campus can be quantified. These data can be shared with administrative teams charged with budget planning and resource allocation.

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