Assessing Student Needs to Clear Obstacles for Retention and Persistence

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Assessing Student Needs to Clear Obstacles for Retention and Persistence  
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Introduction

Hunger, medical bills. Textbook costs. These are some of the unmet needs facing WMU students that the Invisible Need Project (INP) strives to meet. INP serves students so they can stay in school and graduate with a WMU degree. The project’s mission is to assist students so they can focus on why they are in college, be successful in their endeavors, and not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from or how to scrape up enough money for emergencies when life throws a curve ball.

The Invisible Need Project includes:
- The Invisible Need Food Pantry
- The Staufer Emergency Relief Fund
- The Invisible Need Health Fund
- The Books for Broncos
- Broncos.Period.

Methods

Data of student needs was collected through student focus groups. The food pantry serves as an access point to identify struggling students and outreach will focus on the several hundred currently enrolled WMU students who have recently utilized the facility. During the focus groups the facilitator guided the groups through discussion questions related to unmet needs, various resources, and students’ awareness and perception of what is currently available.

Data of approaches taken by other colleges and universities was also collected through website review of institutions with existing programs and resources, as well as outreach to campus personnel at these institutions for phone and/or video conference interviews.

Focus Group Results

- Lack of knowledge of Invisible Need Project.
- Lack of understanding of the resources and who can access them.
- Unmet Needs: transportation, winter clothing, household supplies, and class supplies.
- Name may be confusing to some.
- Hours of operation may be difficult for students.
- Fear of not knowing what to expect when using the food pantry.

“I thought it was helpful to get access to the resources that I wasn’t able to get at the time.”

“For me, I think I don’t need it because I feel like there’s other students that need the project more than I do.”

Suggested Improvements

- Increase advertising and awareness.
- Increase wayfinding efforts.
- Add more community and campus resources in materials.
- Clarify requirements and expectations.
- Keep additional student needs in mind.

Next Steps

- Revisit mission & vision statements, and create strategic plan.
- Dietetics students developing easy to follow recipe guides.
- Partnering with University Libraries’ Open Access textbook initiative.
- Industrial Engineering students revisiting pantry stocking procedures.
- New marketing campaign, including increased social media efforts.
- Increase Broncos.Period, efforts, including new partnership with RSO, PERIOD, the Menstrual Movement at WMU.
- Revisited Student Emergency Relief Fund (SERF) process.
- Create intentional donation partnerships and efforts, including calendar.

Who’s At Risk?

Those most at risk (Hope for College, 2019):
- Students who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming have highest rates of homelessness.
- Gay and Lesbian students have higher rates of housing insecurity compared to heterosexual and bisexual students.
- Rate of food insecurity among African American students is 58%.
- Native American and Alaskan Native students have a high rate of housing insecurity at 67%.
- First generation students are more likely to experience food and housing insecurity.
- Student that have experienced foster care report higher levels of basic need insecurity.

Steps:
- IRB submission and approval
- Invitation sent out to sample of 4,500 students
- Students filled out availability and agreed to audio recording
- First 45 eligible students to sign up were sent details and consent form
- 27 students attended three separate focus groups

“...because I feel like there’s other students that need the project more than I do.”

 från: "Assessing Student Needs to Clear Obstacles for Retention and Persistence" - Josh Conley & Kelly Reed, Invisible Need Project.

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