

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE PERSISTENCE OF AGRO-FISHERIES STUDENTS TOWARDS DEGREE COMPLETION

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on the factors that support/enhance or hinder persistence of agro-fisheries student towards degree completion which employed a qualitative approach including interviews and focus group discussion. The participants were the third year BS Agro-fisheries students. The study considered the background characteristics of the participants, their individual experiences concerning social and academic integration factors as well as those factors that are external to the university, which influence their persistence towards degree completion. Overall results affirmed that agro-fisheries students come to college with a variety of personal, academic, and social background characteristics that both prepare and dispose them, to varying degrees, to engage with the other factors such as the institution and classroom-related factors help develop, enhance or hinder their persistence towards degree completion. Results of this study suggested that the university has not gone far enough on a practical level to ensure that these underrepresented students of agro-fisheries degree program are supported in an effective manner. Thus, it should be prioritized by providing an educational environment with adequate, effective and accessible administrative and educational support services for the students' academic success.

Keywords: Agro-fisheries, completion, degree, persistence, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Student persistence is one of the important issues facing Philippine higher education today. Although the number of students attending universities continues to grow, improving graduation and completion rates remains a challenge.

Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2010) records show that there are slightly over 49,000 students enrolled in agricultural, forestry, and fisheries. This represents only two per cent in the overall discipline group in the Philippine higher education (see Figure1. Higher education enrolment by discipline group, academic year 2010-2011).

Based on the data from CHED, agriculture and its related courses still lag far behind those of their allied degree programs being offered by the State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) all over the country (see Figure2. Higher education graduates by discipline group, academic year 2009-2010).

Legarda (2009), who chairs the Congressional Oversight Committee on Agricultural and Fisheries Modernization (COCAFAM) has noted the disinterest of the youth in the countryside to continue the occupation of their parents. They still see agriculture as a career of last resort, a job for dummies. They prefer to work in the city. "We have to shore up the diminishing enrolment in agriculture and related courses in higher education institutions and replace our aging farmers with the youth who have new mindsets — open to new knowledge,

entrepreneurial and most of all, willing to stay in the farm,” Legarda said (<http://www.philstar.com/Article> 20 April 2010).

This issue puts the onus of providing successful, relevant agriculture and fishery educational experiences for students on the programs and institutions that recruit and train them (The Philippine Star 2009 from <http://www.philstar.com/Article>).

The success of efforts to retain college students in agriculture and related courses degree is crucial to overcome the barriers faced by these students in attaining degrees and entering the workforce.

Similar to what the Philippine government currently envisions on increasing the number of competent graduates of agriculture and its related programs, the Laguna State Polytechnic University Los Baños Campus (LSPU-LBC) has been focusing on recruiting college students to help with the diminishing enrolment in this degree course. But then, recruiting is not always the problem. Many times the problem is on student persistence.

After three decades of targeted recruitment efforts by the State University, entrance of college students into Agro-Fisheries degree programs has increased, but graduation rates, as the CHED records indicate, still lag far behind those of their allied degree programs being offered by the State University (see Figure 3. Distribution of graduates by degree course, academic year 2010-2011 Source: LSPU Los Baños, Office of the Registrar).

Retaining a student is fundamental to the ability of an institution to carry out its mission. A high rate of attrition (the opposite of persistence) is not only a fiscal problem for schools, but a symbolic failure of an institution to achieve its purpose. Thus, it becomes important to understand and act on what research tells about student persistence into the next year level and to graduation.

Although preparation, ability, and motivation are important factors in student persistence they cannot explain all the reasons that students persist or drop out (Reason, 2009).

Braxton (2009) indicates that the lack of student persistence may be labelled the departure puzzle. Given the availability of numerous guides on the selection of colleges and universities by the parents, career counsellors and students and the enormous amount of attention that university officials focus upon the college selection process, it is puzzling that almost one-half of students entering two-year colleges and more than one-fourth of students entering four-year collegiate institutions leave these institutions at the end of their first year (Spedding, 2009).

The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to bring to light factors that both support and hinder persistence of college students in pursuing BS Agro-Fishery course towards degree completion. It specifically determined social integration issues that influence persistence of the college students in pursuing agro-fisheries degree program at the university; determined academic integration issues that influence persistence of the college students in pursuing agro-fisheries degree program at the university; and identified factors external to the university, which influence persistence of the college students towards earning the degree.

METHODOLOGY

This study incorporated qualitative data to arrive at a holistic view of an issue. It employed complete enumeration of the third year BS Agro-Fisheries students at LSPU, Los Baños for the academic year 2011-2012. There are 10 junior students in all. These college students were

purposely selected because they were being identified as persisters (i.e., they manifest the desire to pursue bachelor's degree by having reached their current year level; an indication of being adjusted to the system of their chosen field of specialization from the beginning year through degree completion).

Interviews and focus group using open-ended questions were conducted with students, faculty, and department chairs/staffs of agro-fisheries degree programs for in-depth examination of issues affecting student persistence.

Individual student interviews were undertaken to examine issues affecting persistence of agro-fisheries students and allowed the researcher to explore issues that may be too sensitive to discuss in a group situation. For individual interviews, students who are excelling academically, academically-average and academically-struggling were selected to make comparisons across the spectrum on factors that are contributing and hindering student persistence.

Agro-fisheries faculty members involved in teaching core courses in the degree curricula were interviewed to explore their perceptions as to the functioning and effectiveness of the College Scholarship Program in helping to retain students. Faculty were selected for interviews based on the criteria of teaching or having taught the agro-fisheries core courses required of all students, and/or sponsoring clubs or research projects with students.

Focus group and interview transcripts were examined using content analysis to identify recurrent themes, relationships, and patterns.

Data analysis began with the process of open coding of the data. Once categories were identified through the process of open coding, axial coding of the data followed. Axial coding of the interview and document data in this study allowed for connections to be made from the data set regarding influences on persistence of agro-fisheries students in the study.

To ensure the validity/credibility of the finding, the study used triangulation and member checking.

Data triangulation (use of a variety of data sources) was accomplished through the use of individual student interviews, student focus group interviews, as well as faculty and staff interviews.

Results were presented to the participants and also to the course adviser as a means of member checking. The students and the course adviser confirmed the findings of the study and gave additional insights into issues related to the degree program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results of the focus group discussion with the major participants of the study, as well as in depth interviews of the students, faculty, and staff related to factors that support or hinder persistence of agro-fisheries students towards degree completion.

Social Integration Factors Related to Student Persistence

Peer Support

For students in agro-fisheries degree program, peer support is essential in helping them to persist. Faculty, staff and students alike all emphasize the need for students to identify other students with whom they can establish productive relationships for studying, mentoring and emotional support. For many students, peer support takes the form of study groups. For them, peer study groups and even their practicum are often an outlet for their need to

socialize that fits within a schedule constrained by demanding course work: “we have our little study groups (we do tend to get a lot of homework) so our social life tends to turn to our study groups.” Faculty members emphasize the need for college students to develop a support network of other students within their own degree programs so that they are associating with others who understand what they face as college students. Students and faculty members alike feel strongly that students will have a better chance to be successful if peer groups are formed early in the students’ academic careers. Peer relationships in the form of formalized or informal peer mentoring are beneficial in helping newer students to learn the ropes and in helping older students to stay connected and motivated while completing their degrees.

Academic Integration Factors Related to Student Persistence

Integrating into Campus Life

Several faculty members and students discussed issues related to integrating into college life as a possible barrier to persistence, especially for minority students. Integration issues are present on two levels: finding one’s way in college life, and at the program level, figuring out the “agro-fisheries system.” For students who grow up in culturally different environments, such as the minority students who come from reservations, integration into the college involves change at many levels. A major and obvious change for reservation students is that of going from communities where they are the dominant minority group to coming to a campus where they are part of a much smaller percentage of the population.

Faculty and staff expressed that for many students, being able to identify and find the resources that will help them be successful isn’t an easy task for students who have no prior college experience. The course adviser explained:

Even though (the university) is not that big they just don’t know how to navigate and don’t have anybody to turn to; and some students don’t have their parents to turn to for the reason that they came from distant provinces. And so I think that diminishes confidence too.

This idea that confidence may diminish in students who are new to college life and are having difficulties adapting may further add to feelings of isolation in some students and possibly lead them to reconsider an academic career.

Learning the Agro-fisheries System

Agro-fisheries faculty made reference to students needing to “learn the system” with respect to being successful college students. Learning the system occurs on several levels. A successful student learns how to navigate university and campus life including locating and utilizing campus support programs. A successful student must learn productive study and work habits. And, a successful student must come to comprehend the way learning takes place within agro-fisheries. This includes adapting to or being naturally inclined toward traditional pedagogical methods, and being comfortable with the expectation that a large part of their learning occurs outside of the classroom where they experience actual wading through the mud and in the pond for fish culture and capture likewise, exposure to the sunlight for agriculture.

Faculty members are clear that students “have undergone an orientation” during the registration process. Faculty members in the study see it as the responsibility of the student to figure things out on their own or with the help of their peers. If students have figured out the system of the degree program, have formed productive peer relationships in the form of study groups and/or mentors, and have strong intrinsic motivation and goal-commitment, the

challenges of the curriculum can be overcome and they are successfully retained. The good students figure it out, but some change majors or leave the university.

Connections to the Greater Good

Three students and faculty members talked about the need for social relevance in the Agro-Fisheries curriculum as a factor related to persistence for students. As one of the students put it:

There is no conflict between my culture and what I am learning. In my culture it is good to learn and adapt and bring home the shared knowledge. I just want to put into practice everything I learn to help my family in the province.

Connections to the “real-world” and to relevance to society may be factors to consider in helping to retain students in Agro-Fisheries program.

Faculty Support

“My teacher has kind of taken me in and helped me to figure out where I am going and how to finish. It has been valuable having the one-on-one interaction with the faculty because before I declared my major, they did not really help at all with my schedule. Once I got in the program I became part of the community.” (Super Girl, 19, Mindoro)

When asked what sources of support had been most important to them while working on their degrees, all of the ten students interviewed talked about faculty members in the Agro-Fisheries degree programs. For many students in the study, a smaller class size was one of the reasons they chose to attend this institution. One student stated: “the interaction with the faculty is good. I love how small (the department) is because by the time you get to your second or third year all of the teachers know you so it is real easy to approach any of them.”

Faculty approachability was mentioned by many of the students as a positive aspect of faculty interactions that contributed to persistence. One student expressed a commonly held view that “the teachers are always there to talk to whenever you want.” Another felt that new students coming into the degree program should be mentored in learning to build faculty relationships because they are so valuable:

“I have always been intimidated the first time I go to see a faculty but they have always been very welcoming, helpful and supportive. The teachers have helped me to feel comfortable in class and to understand the material. It would be good to help new students with respect to speaking with teachers, knowing how accessible they really are.” (Super Girl, 19, Mindoro)

An Agro-Fisheries faculty echoed the idea that building relationships with faculty members was something that distinguished successful students from those who were less successful: (What makes them successful is) the degree to which they work collaboratively and consort with their peer students and take advantage of the relationships they can build with faculty. Those that tend to try to go it alone – that’s a real trial for them. They learn to become more responsible. So, the degree to which they integrate with their peer students and take advantage of building faculty relationships outside of the structured class environment is a factor (in persistence).

Students felt supported by faculty members to seek help when they needed it. Aside from help with coursework, faculty members have aided students in finding scholarships, internships, and job opportunities. Several students expressed a sense that their teachers care about their progress.

This sense that someone is monitoring their progress and cares about them is a strong motivational factor for the students in the study.

Although the majority of the students felt faculty members were an asset to their persistence, there was one particular student who had negative experiences with faculty members that were enough to make them reconsider their career paths. A male participant related an uncomfortable experience with a faculty member who because of too much “closeness” to one another tend to tell jokes that sometimes go beyond, which makes him feel uncomfortable. So, in the end the student saw this as a destructive interaction.

In some cases where the faculty was trying to mold them same with his/her academically excellent students, as one male mentioned about how his teacher used to compare him to another student of different major course. Until he found out that it was not only he who experienced such “irritating and degrading” comparison with other students. He knew that from his peers within the college/department.

Instruction

“In Agro-Fisheries, it’s word for word, note for note on the board and you’ve got to write it all down because it could possibly be on the test. And you, a lot of times, just didn’t worry about understanding it at that moment in time because you didn’t have enough time or you would miss the next thing they wrote on the board.” (Lady, 19, San Antonio)

Interviews with students revealed that most of their experiences in Agro-Fisheries classrooms consisted of direct instruction and note-taking with little give and take between students and teachers.

Most students mentioned their practicum as those that allowed for collaborative learning and a way of practicing team skills that will be essential to them in their careers. Their other courses, for the most part, were taught in a very traditional direct instruction format. Lecture and note-taking were the norm for most classes and for the most part students saw that as a function of the type of material they were learning.

Two students said that direct instruction was the way they learned best and therefore, they liked the way courses were taught.

One faculty talked about how he learned Agro-Fisheries in very traditional lecture-driven classrooms. He and his classmates had experienced success in traditionally taught classes yet were mixed in how they valued alternative methods of instruction.

Another faculty talked about how she learned best from direct instruction but knew that for many students, there was a need for more experiential learning even though it was uncomfortable for her: “Because I’m very theoretical and I’ve come to understand that most students, and it doesn’t matter what kind of student they are, they all respond to a little project ‘hands-on-activity’ thing.”

Students most appreciated classes where “real-world” connections were made. One of the teachers interviewed in the study talked about being very explicit in making those connections. This teacher taught in a traditional manner, but was cited by students as a good instructor because of his deliberate attempts to connect the learning within the course to other classes they were taking.

Much of what was discussed by students as the ways they learned best are methods that prove effective for all students regardless of their background or gender.

Two male students and two faculty members discussed the need for more visual presentation of material as a pedagogical technique benefiting students. As one of the students (Barney) explained:

A lot of agro-fisheries students do learn through visual and tactile learning which I find are true for me as well. I have to visually see it in order to understand it. I need to touch the varieties of seed and species of fish, look closely at them to be able to differentiate each one of them so I could be able to illustrate them exactly in my drawing. That's very challenging to me.

When prompted for what they meant about "visually" seeing the material, they referred to having more ability to manipulate things, or to draw what they are learning. Two of the faculty members expressed awareness of the need for instruction that incorporated multiple modes of learning.

One faculty member talked about the need for faculty development to increase understanding of learning styles:

"I feel that it's really imperative that faculty get a lot of faculty development and training so that they can understand that there are people with different learning styles, with different ways of looking at things that aren't wrong, they're just different."

This was the only instance where a faculty member in the study suggested the need to further understand these types of pedagogical issues.

External Factors Related to Student Persistence

Family Support

During interviews, discussion of family influences emerged in many of the exchanges with students, faculty and staff as a factor affecting persistence in college and in agro-fisheries degree programs. Eight students mentioned family as a source of support in helping them to persist. For the students in the study, family included mostly, parents, siblings, and aunts.

One male student talked of his mother who has been, in his words, "reaming self-motivation and confidence into his head" for years and has made him feel he can accomplish anything he chooses. As he puts it: "My parents are just always there to give support, allow me to do whatever I want, just for them, seeing me studying rather than being idle in just staying at home." (Action Man, 19, Calamba)

A faculty member sees family as a source of support when students are struggling with perseverance and career disposition: "You don't do well in the class, you don't do well on the exam and you need someone who loves you to say 'it's okay, you're going to be successful.' Just sort of that unconditional support rather than a teacher who's sitting here going 'well you should have done this and this'."

Overall, students felt that family were there to support them and were proud of their academic pursuits, a fact that students find helped to motivate them when they were struggling.

While members of their family can provide emotional support, it can also place additional demands and responsibilities for some that extend beyond their life as a college student. For students who have to work for a part-time job in order to support other financial needs, balancing their roles as a worker with the demands of their degree program can become a source of stress while attending school. Family demands were cited by several faculty members as reasons why some agro-fisheries students have somehow difficulty keeping up with course work: "It seems that the pattern for them if they have to go back home, which we understand if they need to go do something, they should just go do it. But if they haven't communicated that early...I feel like they don't come to class because they're afraid to confront me."

When asked to talk about a student whom they remember as being outstanding and to describe their characteristics, faculty members often described students as very hardworking, responsible and adaptable, meaning that student would do everything without any complain at all, very persistent to his academic goal.

Financial Aid

Student interviews confirmed the importance of scholarships as a source of support for the students in this study. They appreciated the financial assistance offered by the scholarship program to help them through their program.

One issue related to finances arose in student, faculty, and staff interviews: that of students working while attending college. For many students, working an outside job is a necessity to meet living expenses while they are in school. As one student stated:

“Of course, even though we have free tuition, we still cannot shoulder all of the expenses we have here in the school, thence, we don’t have a choice, like me, I am also a working student, so for sometimes or oftentimes, I get late in going to my classes. I am thankful for having considerate teachers, they do understand it...” (Maskman, 19, Calamba)

The students interviewed in this study are in their junior years of their degree program. They have crossed the threshold where they were at risk of shifting majors or dropping out, and have gone on to be successful in their academic careers. Aside from the findings already cited, there are certain more intangible characteristics of these students that are instrumental in keeping them on their academic paths. These characteristics are of a more intrinsic nature yet seem to be held by the majority of successful students in the study.

Along with a high level of goal commitment and intrinsic motivation to complete their degrees, many of the students interviewed in the study are highly involved in academic life. Agro-fisheries clubs figure prominently. For many students, taking on leadership roles in organizations, being active to various campus activities, mentoring younger students and working closely with their teachers contribute to their persistence towards degree completion. A strong desire to be proactive in all aspects of their education is apparent.

Successful students in agro-fisheries are motivated individuals with favourable knowledge of career opportunities, as well as perceived success in the chosen field so as to provide help to their family. Much of the motivation is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic including “being employed to the respective field once they have graduated, “...as compared to other courses, we are able to get job easily for our course is said to be in demand nowadays...”

A high level of involvement with peers, clubs, and mentoring is also characteristic of successful agro-fisheries students. College students persist through academic and personal challenges to become successful graduates of their degree programs.

Interpretations in Light of the Literature

Findings of this study support much of what has been written regarding student persistence in higher education and specifically for college students in agro-fisheries degree program. Support for Tinto’s model of student integration (Tinto, 1993 as cited in Tinto, 2002) is evident in interviews with successful agro-fisheries students in the degree program. Participants in this study who have reached their junior years are individuals who have experienced both social and academic integration into the university that has served to strengthen their goal-commitment of obtaining a college degree. Findings of this study reveal another layer of integration not found in the literature, i.e. integrating into the sub-culture of agro-fisheries education identified in this study as “learning the system.” In this respect, students must learn (often with little external support) to navigate the structure of the agro-

fisheries discipline and to become successful learners within the context of often very traditional classroom instruction.

For agro-fisheries students, external factors such as family responsibilities and financial concerns play important roles in persistence. These factors put forth by Bean and Metzner in their Student Attrition Model (1985 as cited in McClanahan, 2004) seem to play a particularly important role for the students in this study. The findings of Cabrera, Nora and Casteneda (1993 as cited in Crissman & Uperaft, 2000) that a student's intent to persist is the strongest indicator of actual persistence is well supported in this study. Successful students are those who persist in spite of the challenges (or perhaps because of them) and hold strong to the aspiration towards earning a degree.

CONCLUSIONS

Student in agro-fisheries education program and in the agro-fisheries workforce is an issue which has global implications in a world that is becoming smaller due to advances in technology and communications. Insights into reasons for the continued lack of representation are paramount to changing the landscape of the agro-fisheries workforce.

This study has helped to illuminate ways in which students are supported and challenged in their academic pursuits in agro-fisheries program. Many of the issues that surfaced in the study support much of what has been written in the literature related to students in the LSPU-LB's College of Agro-Fisheries and Sciences degree programs. Where the study offers its most significant contributions is in contextualizing the findings to the institution under study and offering data on which to base programmatic improvements.

This study has implications for not only educational processes during the course or in particular to the university but also the marketing of agriculture and its related courses (i.e., Agro-Fisheries) all over the country, and the targeting of that marketing effort. With patient and sound teaching coupled with an educational program that meets students' needs for self-determination and competence, it is felt that it is possible to facilitate the persistence of college students toward school and consequently to increase school attendance, participation leading to degree completion.

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