
Book Review

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McPherson, E. *Real outreach: A practical guide to retaining and graduating college students*. Detroit, MI: Dr. McPherson Coaching LLC, 2021; 66 pp.: ISBN-13 978-1737273103, \$13.99 (hardcover).

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Best efforts to increase student retention and decrease the gap in educational resources between students to higher education professionals can create authentic and safe spaces. This creates equitable spaces for rich learning environments because students feel supported not only academically, but socially and emotionally through their respective programs. Dr. Ezella McPherson, author of *Real Outreach: A Practical Guide to Retaining and Graduating College Students*, provides clear expectations and actionable steps to achieve student retention by exploring the role of various departments such as advising and financial aid. McPherson suggests that departments should cross collaborate to create a holistic approach to support, as student experiences and identities vary. The book is targeted towards higher education professionals, however, it also can be used as a guide for students to assist in their own facilitation of student success in higher education. Based on McPherson's own challenges in higher education as a first-generation college student, her eagerness to succeed in college led her to continue supporting students in her various roles as a higher education professional. McPherson utilizes storytelling to describe her passion about "persistence, retention, and graduation of college students" (p. 11), which led her to write this book.

McPherson draws insight for her book from her experiences within academia such as an academic advisor at Wayne State University and an inaugural director of the Indiana University South Bend Titan Success Center. Through her own experience as a student and professional in higher education, McPherson brings important insights about and definitions for multiple higher education and student affairs positions in postsecondary organizations.

Real Outreach was carefully curated to understand the different tiers of student retention and success models. For example, McPherson mentions her own experience as a student and how that translated into skill and resiliency as a higher education

professional. McPherson resonates with the student population she served, thus was perfectly positioned to offer her services to this same student population. Additionally, she used student reporting as data for her book. For example, McPherson emphasizes the importance of keeping accurate details and notes about students to create wrap-around support by departments who are working with the same student.

Real Outreach is organized in ten chapters. Chapters one through four offer perspectives and definitions of student-facing departments. Chapters five through eight provide external resources that assist students to thrive beyond the traditional tiers of academia. Lastly, Chapters 9 and 10, explores and utilizes the Student Retention and Graduation model.

Chapter Synopses

In chapter one, “My Story and Retention Experience”, McPherson details how her own experiences shaped her trajectory to continue supporting students as a professional in higher education. McPherson (2021) recalls a moment where her writing skills were subjected to failure. She states, “like Jennings, I faced academic challenges in college...I remember going to the U of M Sweetland Writing Center to get my papers critiqued because my first year writing professor was convinced that I lacked ‘college writing skills’” (p. 5). This enabled her to seek additional support, however the challenges did not end there. As a first generation student, you face many barriers and are forced to navigate it on your own. McPherson (2021) recalls another instance where she had to reach out to financial aid and even the counseling center, after her grandmother’s passing. She was able to ask questions and advocate for herself which resulted in additional financial aid awardability. Her vulnerability in sharing her financial struggles during a difficult time, highlighted how different departments, in collaboration, can achieve the mission of student success and degree completion.

In chapter two, McPherson (2021) discusses the support academic advisors can give to students at all levels in their educational journey. For example, academic advisors are equipped to give students information on booster classes, to help raise a student’s GPA. As McPherson (2021) notes, booster classes are “courses that are relatively easy for students” to receive a passing grade (p. 13). Academic advisors also support schedule balancing, registration, and connecting students to the appropriate offices for other forms of support. McPherson (2021) later recalls an instance where she assisted a student named Larry, during an early outreach initiative at one of the institutions she worked at. Larry was an African American male student who was discouraged due to his slow academic progress compared to his peers. McPherson (2021) resonated with the student, and she provided her own expertise by creating a student success plan and study group. This empowered the student to continue in his studies, as he felt supported to continue in his educational journey.

In chapter three, the role of academic success coaches was explored. Academic success coaches ensure that students are well supported beyond academics, accounting

for social, emotional, financial, and life issues that students may encounter while in college (p. 19). Life issues such as death in the family, inability to manage time effectively, amongst other factors vary, and priorities may change due to unforeseeable events, such as a global pandemic. McPherson (2021) humbly noted Shannon's experience; a student she worked with. Shannon had a learning disability and was on academic probation, similar to many students in the United States. After connecting with one of Shannon's professors, he was willing to accommodate for "additional tutoring sessions with the student on Friday evenings and on the weekends" (p. 21). Ultimately, this shed light on the important role played by academic success coaches in a student's academic journey. Students who utilized academic coaches felt that they did not have to navigate college on their own.

In chapter four, mentoring was explored. As McPherson explained, a mentor is "able to share wisdom with a mentee, and a good mentor would want their mentee to succeed" (p. 25). In chapter five, student organizations were praised. Student organizations can provide spaces of building community, building inclusivity, mentoring, networking, and providing a safe space for students to feel connected to their respective campuses. For students to succeed, they should feel like they belong in their respective schools, otherwise, social isolation can occur. In chapter six, McPherson (2021) noted how retention is important in college, retention that can occur through student employment. McPherson (2021) later recalls one of the campuses she worked at, and how that institution provided paid internships through the Career Services office. Ultimately, providing paid internship and employment opportunities for students create inclusivity and retain students to do well in courses as outside employment roles may not be as accommodating to a student's schedule, amongst other barriers (p. 33).

In chapter seven, technology and having access was highlighted. To implement successful retention, certain software programs such as Student Tracking Advising Retention System (STARS) should be made available across all campuses nationwide. This is because applications like STARS gives the administrator and the user (student view) access to view what holds they have, advising tools, appointment scheduling, and access to resources at their leisure. More so, being able to document experiences with students properly can provide insight to the next person who would help the same student and continue the rapport building, which was later explained in chapter eight, as a tool for higher education professionals to use in their advising process.

In chapters 9 and 10, McPherson (2021) explored real outreach, using the REAL (resiliency, empathy, approachability, and listening) Student Retention and Graduation Model and "Outreach" (Observations, Understanding, Trust, Resources/Referrals, Encouragement, Advocate, Caring and Compassionate Customer Service, and Hospitality) in the same model. Here, the strategic approach included social, academic, financial, and life support to create real outreach, as noted in Figure 1 (p. 43). Despite multiple barriers, first generation students have successfully faced adversity and have graduated from their programs with assistance of all leaders who were on their academic journey. Empathy was defined as understanding student experiences

to a certain extent and providing safe spaces for students to feel the emotions that come with the barriers they are facing. The third tier, approachability was described as having an open door policy when engaging with students. Students will only be as comfortable as we allow them to, therefore, it is important to be approachable so students can confidently voice the support they need and graduate. Lastly, active listening is important as students may approach advisors to voice their thoughts but not necessarily to gauge an opinion.

Conclusion

The advocacy that McPherson (2021) expressed throughout the book was refreshing as a higher education professional. To accomplish effective retention and advocacy efforts, higher education professionals must understand that students have different experiences. Ultimately, higher education professionals should assist their students in every way possible, but there are few guides like this book that break down each role in academia and provide a capstone definition of how that can be implemented in everyday interactions. McPherson (2021) provided an exceptional book, as she provided her own raw experiences as both the student and the professional. More so, the REAL Outreach Model was important to highlight as these models may exist, but not all practice these steps diligently.

The book resonated with me because I was once a student, navigating college for the first time with no direction. Like McPherson (2021), I was a first generation college student paving the way for generations after me to follow in my footsteps. Today, as an administrator myself, I can utilize the tools I learned from this book and cultivate a safe space for students where they can voice their concerns and advocate for change in their distinct educational journeys.

Reference

McPherson, E. (2021). *Real outreach: A practical guide to retaining and graduating college students*. Dr. McPherson Coaching LLC.