To pass or not to pass: A qualitative inquiry on students' views on the academic retention policy

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Retention policy is an important guiding principle implemented by academic institution to promote students' development, yet evidence is unable to disentangle how the effect of retention policy varies by the outcome in student's intellect and morality. This study gathered the views and perspectives of students in relation to the retention policy of the college. This study used the qualitative-phenomenological method. Seven participants who gained the lowest general percentage average were purposively selected. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain the pertinent information. Results revealed that retention policy was a source of encouragement for students to perform well and it was a necessity to develop and enhance students' cognition. However, few students mentioned that the retention policy was a source of stress because they needed to comply with the standard requirements imposed by the college. They reiterated that the policy discriminated against slow-learners. The findings implicate that concrete actions may be done to address the misconception on the retention policy. Strong academic support and resources may be offered to address students' needs especially to those who were at-risk. Retention policy will remain a challenge to all students if the academic institution is not fully equipped to respond to the needs of the students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

High attrition of students in colleges was a priority concern; hence, pressure exists to attract and retain students caused by the formulation of college retention policy [1]-[4]. However, retention policy has negative implications for students' self-esteem and efficacy [5], and expectation for promotion to the next grade [6]. Also, it brings concern and pressure to attract and retain students academically in their courses. Moreover, retention policy is a particularly pressing issue in the context of widening participation for under-represented student groups, increasing student diversity and educational quality assurance and accountability processes, as well as on personal impact and loss of life chances for students [7]. Thus, the issue is not only the central concern for students but also to all academic stakeholders [8].

Retention policy establishes a suitable and effective provision which governs all students of the Department of Education. The policy provides the necessary intervention that would highly encourage students to meet the requirements of their respective fields. Through the provisions of this policy, the

Education Department aims to filter out students that are not meeting the minimum requirements. This measure would furthermore improve the probability of graduates passing the board exams; ensure the quality of education; exhibit high general self-esteem; and increase academic self-concept [9]. Moreover, retention policy is significant for the academic institutions to screen only those students who are prepared for higher education [10]; and for institutions to promote the academic mindsets among their stakeholders [11].

Locally, section 16.18.4 of Manual Operation of Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST) Digos Campus stated, "Any student who at the end of the semester has a failing grade in 51-75% of the total numbers of academic units in which the student receives a final grade shall be dropped from the rolls of the department; if more than 75%, the student shall be permanently disqualified from the readmission to the college". This provision created hundreds of opinions and views from the students. The students understand the importance of quality assurance and accountability; however, the academic institutions role of molding the minds and attitudes should also be considered. The questions of how the college maintains its social responsibility and what the college's student services department has provided to the at-risk students should be cleared. Retention policy may not be questioned if rightful services and programs are given to the students.

This study was conducted not to evaluate but to determine the students' views, opinions, and perspective on the retention policy of the college. It also would like to look into the students' strategies to comply with the retention policy requirements, and to cull their experiences which were worth sharing to others. The results of this study may become bases of the college to re-examine the provisions of the retention policy; thus, making it acceptable to both the students and the college.

The main purpose of this qualitative-phenomenological study was to inquire into the significant experiences of the students and to seek answers to the following questions: 1) What are the views of the students in the SPAMAST's retention policy?; 2) What strategies are used by the students to comply with retention policy?; 3) What significant experiences can the students share to other students?

For policymakers, the finding of this study may give these individuals new ideas on how to appropriately implement the retention policy. Hence for educational roles, the findings may provide the faculty and other educators establishing a strong practice of the colleges' retention policy. For students, the findings of this study may share relevant insights to the students on how to manage their studies, thus comply with the retention policy of the college.

2.   RESEARCH METHOD

2.1.   Research design

This study used the qualitative-phenomenological method. Qualitative method was appropriate in this study because it dealt with the personal experiences of the students. It also dealt with the students' individual perceptions, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, concepts, and ideas. On the other hand, phenomenology was appropriate in this study because it dealt with a particular phenomenon which affected the students, the college's retention policy.

2.2.   Research locale

This study was conducted in Southern Philippines Agri-business and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology Digos Campus located in Matti, Digos City, Philippines. The college has a vision to be a leading institution of higher learning in the fields of aqua terrestrial and technopreneurship responsive to the development needs in Southeast Asia and beyond. Further its mission is to imbue with sincerity, excellence, commitment, and good leadership; an institution fervently carries out its functions to provide high quality instruction, relevant research, focused extension and self-sufficient production cultural heritage, addressing gender sensitivity and climate change. Furthermore, as a public college it is mandated to provide higher technologies and vocational instruction and training in science, agricultural and industrial fields, as well as short term technical or vocational courses. It is also mandated to promote research, advance studies and progressive leadership in its areas of specialization.

2.3.   Research instrument

The instrument used in this study was the researchers-made and validated interview guide. The interview guide was based on the research question. It was subjected to validators' evaluation to check its internal and external validity.

2.4. Research participants

Seven students were purposely selected to participate in this study. These students were selected because they gained the lowest general percentage average (GPA) during the second semester of SY 2018-2019. These students were coming from all levels.

2.5. Procedures of the study

The researchers asked permission from the office of the Dean of Education to conduct the study. After the Dean's approval, letters of consent were given to the selected participants for the study. The researchers formulated a guide interview questionnaire based on the objectives of the study. The questions were focused on the students' views, the strategies they used to comply with the policy and their essential experiences they could share to others. The questions were validated by experts using [12] interview questions validation sheet.

Before the conduct of the interviews, the researchers conducted an interview protocol to the research-participants. They were also asked to sign the informed consent. Moreover, each participant was asked to choose their pseudonyms to hide their identities. Then, they were divided into three focus groups with a random number of members in accordance with their year level. Each focus group was interviewed separately. This was done to maintain consistency of answers of the participants.

2.6. Analysis of information

The information gathered from the four focus groups were transcribed and were given to the data analyst for thematic analysis. In the thematic analysis, the information is grouped into a pattern of themes, frequency of occurrences of the responses, and core ideas [13]. Mentioned that thematic analysis (TA) is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular method of qualitative data analysis. It provides qualitative researchers with a foundation in the basic skills needed to engage with other approaches. In addition [14] said that thematic analysis is a poorly demarcated, rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method.

2.7. Gathering of information

The source of information for this research study was taken from the interviews of the research-participants during the focus groups. The researchers provided interview guide questions which were formulated based from objectives of the study. Seven participants were interviewed at separate time schedules depending on their vacant time. However, before the interviews were conducted, a letter for consent was given to each participant. This was done to address one of the requirements of ethics which was to ask permission. After the interviews, the researchers transcribed the recorded information. After which, the verbatim information was given to the data analyst for thematic analysis. The thematic analysis was presented in table format.

2.8. Data analysis

In the conduct of data analysis, the verbatim information from the interviews was subjected to vertical and horizontal analysis. In the vertical analysis, the questions were supplied with answers from each focus group. Only the gist of the answers to the questions was given consideration; although some relevant nuances were also regarded. After the vertical analysis, the horizontal analysis immediately followed. In the horizontal analysis, keen deliberation to the answers was essential. The analyst looked for patterns of answers which were transformed into themes, sought for frequency of the occurrences of the responses, and the core ideas for each pattern [15]. Mentioned that thematic analysis as a technique in qualitative research used for methodically identifying, shaping, and contribution insight into patterns through inductive, deductive, semantic, latent, realist or essentialist, and even constructionist coding and theme developments of facts and information from the given statement of the participants.

2.9. Trustworthiness of the study

One of the loopholes of a qualitative research method was the aspect trustworthiness [16]. According to LaBanca [17], trustworthiness in qualitative research can improve the reliability and impartiality of results of the study. Also, it ensures how the researchers address the results of their study in building credibility (which entails the integrity of the research), transferability (which determine the application to other context), conformability (that deals with the level of fairness among the researcher in conducting the study), and lastly, dependability (that the study could be continual in which result would be constant).

2.10. Ethical approval

Necessary protocols were conducted to address this aspect. Letter of consents with the inclusions of confidentiality and withdrawal clauses made. Moreover, interview protocols were given to the participants before the conduct of the formal interviews. Justice was also observed by not compelling the participants to participate; by orienting them to the objections of the study; and by revealing to them the results of the study. Convenience of the participants was also considered. High regard of respect to each participant was also done. The student-participants were not exploited and their autonomy was greatly served. Lastly, the dignity of all participants was respected by not sharing their personal information to others.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on the gathered information from the focus group discussion (FGD). On Table 1, the frequency of responses of the participants was considered as General if it obtained 50% and above; Typical if it garnered 21% and above but not more than 49%, while Variant if it obtained less than 20%.

Table 1. Themes and core ideas on students on the retention policy

Themes	Frequency of response	Core ideas
Elucidations of the retention policy	Typical Variant	Encouraging students to study harder Training students to be intellectually competent Assuring quality of teaching Disciplining students
Considerations on adversaries	Variant	Stressing the students Discriminating slow learners Making teachers uncommitted Testing students' capacity Making students depended on the retention policy
Action for retention	General Variant	Studying harder Complying with requirements Improving communication skills Developing students to improve
Distinctions on the essence of the retention	Variant	Motivating perform better Enhancing students' creativity thinking skills Improving students' capabilities Challenging students to do more

3.1. Elucidations of the retention policy

Typically, the students found the retention policy to be an advantage because they believed that it encouraged them to study harder. It implies that the policy becomes the students' encouragement to perform well in their studies. Variantly, few students found that the retention policy trained them to be intellectually competent. This was true because with the retention policy at hand, students needed to improve their cognition and understanding of the lessons. Also, few others commented that with the retention policy, students were assured that they were receiving quality instruction. Only those who were to hurdle the barometer passed. Likewise, others revealed that the policy's aim was to academically give discipline to the students. The students considered the retention policy as an imaginary whip that those who would not perform could taste its venom.

The results above corroborate with Tarver [18] who opined that retention policy capacitates learners to enhance their learning and encourages them to acquire mastery and to display competence; Taylor [19] also said that retention policy is a strong motivator for students to study more; likewise Sibanda [20] mentioned that retention assesses students' knowledge of the program. On the other hand, Deci [21] pointed out that retention policy disciplines and trains students to be intellectually competent. Consequently, it was important for college staff to offer beginning students opportunities to increase their perceptions of their academic competence at an early stage in their studies [22]. Another aspect of students' physiological need for competence was the ability to feel competent to achieve their goals. In order to meet this need, Yorke [23] suggested that many students must engage in what he calls a process of 'satisficing'. In 'satisficing, students need to make choices in their study that will allow them to achieve their goals. A satisficing learner comes close to being a strategic learner or 'cue-seeker' Russell and Slater [24] and Säljö [25] described them as a

student who may adopt both deep learning and surface learning strategies in order to achieve performance goals and learning goals.

3.2. Considerations on adversaries

In contrast to the positive contributions of retention policy which affected the students, there were some adversaries that students perceived. Variantly, students found the retention policy to create stress because they need to comply with the standard requirement imposed by the college. For them, the policy required them to have high-cognition abilities and extra effort performance to attain the specific guidelines. Additionally, few students commented that the retention policy discriminated against slow-learners without clear and concrete programs for their academic survival. Teachers will just do percolation of students based on their academic performances nothing more nothing less. Also, few students perceived that because of the retention policy students, teachers become uncommitted in giving of grades and performing quality instructions to the students. In addition, the students also believed that the retention policy tests their specific capacity. The retention policy challenged them to flex their capabilities and capacities in learning. It also promoted students to be more competent, resilient in the standardized requirement and to be intellectually prepared and enhanced. Likewise, students commented that because of the retention policy, students become dependent and focused on what the retention policy demanded. It made students half-hearted individuals-academically and theoretically excellent but physically incapable.

In previous researchers, it was found that retention policy makes students to be particularly prone to stress [26] due to the transitional and requirement to be fulfilled under the program which the retention policy was implemented [27]. It was important that stress intervention programs be designed to address stress of college students. However, in order to design an effective intervention, the stressors specific to college students must be determined [28], [29]. Additionally, Larsen [30] stated, slow learners must be provided with instructional opportunities in accordance with their educational needs and equal learning treatment in order to catch up and be levelled with other students either fast or slow learners. Thus, Vasudevan [31] believed that these slow-learners are benefitted from guided instruction. Consequently, Celep [32] said that due to this phenomenon, the students are able to give feedback focused to the teachers' commitment in learning. Teachers' commitment was highly related to teachers' work performance which has a significant influence on students' achievement. In any educational institutions students were the most important element.

3.3. Action for retention

Generally, the students found the retention policy as a necessity and a training ground for them to study harder. It implies that the policy provided indication to develop and enhance students' cognition through studying beyond their abilities. Variantly, few students said that they needed to comply with teachers' requirements and be skillful in terms of communication skills if they wanted to be retained in their courses.

Learners' engagement in school was a necessity and in demand in order to be retained in the program. Student engagement was defined as a student's academic commitment and application of knowledge learned from the lessons [33]. It also connotes the quality of students' effort and meaningful understanding [34]; thus, reflecting a constructivist approach to learning [35]. Enhancing students' academic performance was such a way for the students to aid and fulfil their needs of complying the retention policy required.

3.4. Distinctions on the essence of the retention

Variantly, students find retention policy to be a platform of development and a motivation to make them improve and perform better in the process of teaching and learning. By the standard given by the said policy, it promoted student-centeredness to practice and to possess quality education and assurance. Moreover, students considered retention policy as a wheel of improving their capabilities, wherein the retention policy strengthened and broadened their learning and challenged their abilities to do more in their studies.

The retention policy itself cannot attain these distinctions of essentiality given by the students' perspective without the help of the instructors who strengthen and bold the retention policy in the program. According to Pascarella and Terenzini [36], there is a relationship between retention policy and involvement of students and faculty members. Likewise, researchers [37], [38] averred that faculty are considered important contributors to mentor and advise students, to shape the future of academic programs, and to prepare future citizens for the challenges of a complex world [39], [40]. They believed that teachers are creators of knowledge and information for their learners [41]. Pointed out that through retention, it enables teachers to develop and utilize such learning and teaching strategies that promote a more active, student-

centered approach to learning, which draws on students' previous experiences and interests, that helps to enhance students' engagement and course's commitment.

4. CONCLUSION

Whilst not exhaustive, the results of this study and the literature reviewed have provided students' insights, deep consciousness, and action to the phenomenon, which is the retention policy. More importantly, students elucidated their positive opinions, ideas, and beliefs; expressed their challenges and adversities they encountered; revealed their plan of action to academically sustain; and expressed their varying views on the essence of the college retention policy. The results of this study may not generalize the entire perspectives of the college's population. The findings only represent those students with nearly failing marks and students who need to exert more academically. Likewise, the findings did not involve the factors that may come into play in students' circumstances. Nevertheless, the researchers have provided a new argument on what are the essential actions the college needs to be done so that the retention policy will have full acceptability to all students.

Retention policy is crucial because it can make or break the students. If the policy was well accepted by the students, positive reactions would happen. Thus, students would consider it as a standard that needs to be obtained. On the other hand, if students deny it, then, they become lazy and uncommitted. It was therefore the call of the college's personnel such as the Dean and teachers to explain to the students the aim of having a retention policy for their course. The researchers observe in a few colleges that some students who could not accept their failures decided to curtail their lives. Moreover, academic institutions may also offer psychological programs for students who fail in their courses to lessen their emotional burden. Also, students' organizations may also offer tutorial programs for students who struggle in their subjects. Lastly, academic institutions with selective admission policies may scrutinize in admitting the students by guiding them to the appropriate course which is dependent on the scores they obtained in the entrance exam. The researchers believed that higher education may not be for all. However, individuals who decide to study further may be given chances for they too long for further knowledge and skills.

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