

Student Retention: The Big Picture

Student Attrition: Root Causes & Systemic Solutions

1. **ACADEMIC Roots**—student withdrawal related to:
 - a) inadequate *preparation* to meet the academic demands of college coursework
 - b) *disinterest in/boredom with* the content of courses or their method of delivery.
 2. **MOTIVATIONAL Roots**—student attrition related to:
 - a) low level of *commitment* to college in general or the specific college attended
 - b) *perceived irrelevance* of the college experience.
 3. **PSYCHOSOCIAL Roots**—student departure related to:
 - a) *social* factors
 - b) *emotional* issues.
 4. **FINANCIAL ROOTS**—student attrition related to:
 - a) *inability (or perceived inability) to afford* the total cost of college
 - b) *perception* that the *cost* of college *outweighs* its *benefits*.
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1. ACADEMIC ROOTS

1.1 ACADEMIC UNDERPREPAREDNESS

Attrition stemming from students being inadequately prepared to accommodate the *academic demands* of college and to meet minimal *academic standards*, i.e., attrition due to *academic failure or dismissal*.

Retention Strategies:

- *High School-College Partnerships*: college and high school faculty collaborate to identify key/core preparatory knowledge and skills.
- *Summer Bridge Programs*: summer program (lasting from one to six weeks) delivered to students during the summer intervening between their last term in high school and their

first term in college, thus serving as a “bridge” between high school and higher education.

- Initial course *placement* and subsequent course *sequencing* that carefully builds on *pre-requisite* or *co-requisite* skills/knowledge
- *Early-alert (Early-warning)* systems for students’ experiencing initial academic difficulty
- Early identification & recruitment of *academically gifted* students for *honors* programs and *peer tutoring*
- Promoting early academic skill-development via a *first-year seminar* (student success course) and/or *infusing* academic success strategies into the *first-year curriculum*

1.2 **ACADEMIC DISINTEREST (BOREDOM)**

Attrition triggered by lack of student *interest* in, or *enthusiasm* for, the type of academic learning experience that characterizes college coursework (i.e., the content of courses and/or the process of course delivery).

Retention Strategies:

- *Faculty Development*—promoting the use of “engaging” *pedagogy*
- *Faculty recognition, rewards, & incentives*
- *New-faculty* recruitment & orientation

2. **MOTIVATIONAL ROOTS**

2.1 **LOW INITIAL COMMITMENT**

Attrition resulting from *weak initial intent* of the student to *stay at* and *graduate from* the *particular college* s/he is attending.

Retention Strategies:

- Promoting *early* institutional and/or departmental *identification/incorporation* via *rituals*
- Showcasing *alumni* success stories

2.2 **COMPETING “EXTERNAL” COMMITMENTS**

Attrition stemming from *concurrent commitments or obligations* to communities outside of college (e.g., family, friends, or work), which “pull away” students’ time and energy that would otherwise be committed to higher education.

Retention Strategies:

- Increasing *community outreach* and *partnering* with the college
- Increasing time spent by students *on campus* via on-campus *employment* and on-campus *living*

2.3 **IRRELEVANCY**

Attrition deriving from students’ uncertainty about whether the academic experience is relevant to “*real life*” outside the classroom, or pertinent to their *personal and professional plans*.

Retention Strategies:

- Intentional, explicit articulation of the *benefits of liberal learning & general education*
- “Developmental” *academic advising*
- Intrusive promotion of students’ *long-range planning*
- Integrating *experiential learning* opportunities into the formal curriculum
- Integration of *academic advising & career counseling services*
- *Collaboration* between *academic advising, academic departments* and *career development services*

3. **PSYCHOSOCIAL ROOTS**

3.1 **ISOLATION**

Attrition caused by students’ *lack of personal and meaningful social contact* with other members of the college community, resulting in feelings of *separation* or *marginalization*.

Retention Strategy: Promoting students’ “*social integration*”

- Promoting student-*student (peer)* interaction
- Promoting student-*faculty* interaction
- Promoting student-*staff* interaction.

3.2 ***INCONGRUENCE* (a.k.a., *INCOMPATIBILITY*)**

Attrition attributable to poor institutional or departmental “fit” stemming from a *mismatch* between the *student’s* expectations, interests, or values and those of the prevailing college community.

Retention Strategies:

- Increasing the *amount and accuracy* of institutional and departmental information available to students *prior to entry*, i.e., during the marketing/recruitment process.
- Adopting student recruitment and admissions practices that promote better student-college “fit”
- Intentional creation of diverse (heterogeneous) student sub-communities or special-interest groups to provide students with a social “niche.”

3.3 ***TRANSITIONAL ADJUSTMENT DIFFICULTIES***

Attrition resulting from new students experiencing difficulty coping with the *initial changes, demands* or *stressors* that accompany transition into the college and/or departmental “culture.”

Retention Strategies:

- New-student *orientation* programming
- “Extended-orientation” *course* (a.k.a., student success or college success course)
- “*Front-loading*” of the college’s most effective, student-centered instructors and advisors
- *Proactive & intrusive* delivery of psychosocial support (e.g., early identification, referral, and collaboration with personal counseling services)
- Minimizing, streamlining, and humanizing *institutional bureaucracy*.

4. **FINANCIAL ROOTS**

4.1 ***INABILITY* (or *PERCEIVED INABILITY*) to *AFFORD* COLLEGE**

Retention Strategies:

- Strategic financial-aid *packaging*
- Financial-aid & money-management *counseling*

4.2 PERCEPTION that the *COSTS* of COLLEGE *OUTWEIGH* its *BENEFITS*

Retention Strategies:

- Show them the *numbers*: early, intentional education about the *fiscal benefits* of a college education
- Show them the *people*: gainfully employed *alumni*.

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RECOMMENDED REFERENCES & RESOURCES ON STUDENT RETENTION

REFERENCES

- Beal, P., & Noel, L. (1980). *What works in student retention*. The American College Testing Program and The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. (Eric Reproduction Service No. 197 635)
- Braxton, J. M. (2000). *Reworking the departure puzzle: New theory and research on college student retention*. Nashville: University of Vanderbilt Press.
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- Lenning, O. T., Beal, P. E., & Sauer, K. (1980). *Retention and attrition: Evidence for action and research*. Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.
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- National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities (1990). *Undergraduate completion and persistence at four-year colleges and universities*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Noel, L., Levitz, R., & Kaufmann, J. (1982). *Organizing the campus for retention*. Iowa City, Iowa: American College Testing Program & The National Center for Academic Advancement of Educational Practices.
- Terrell, M. C., & Wright, D. J. (Eds.) (1988). *From survival to success: Promoting minority student retention*. NASPA Monograph No. 9. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

RESOURCES

- Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing. (<http://baywood.com>)
- Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education* (Newsletter). Madison, WI: Magna Publications. (www.magnapubs.com)
- Website:
<http://www.noellelevitz.com> (See profiles of campuses with award-winning retention programs.)

Appendix A

THE ART & SCIENCE OF MAKING *STUDENT REFERRALS*: SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

1. *Describe* the **goals and services** of the referred service. (Don't assume that the student already know its purpose or function.)
2. *Personalize* the referral: Refer the student to a **person** (a **name**)—rather than an office.
3. Reassure the student of the **qualifications and capability** of the person to whom s/he is being referred.
4. Help the student identify *what questions* to ask and *how to approach* the resource person.
5. Make explicitly sure that the student knows **where** to go and how to get there.
6. **Phone** for an appointment while the student is *in your presence*.
7. **Walk** with the student to the referred person's *office*.
8. **Follow-up** the initial referral by asking the student *if* the contact occurred, *how* it went, and whether there will be *future* contact.
9. **Praise** the student for making the effort to seek support and taking a step toward self-improvement.

Appendix B

MAJOR *FORMS/VARIETIES* OF FACULTY-STUDENT CONTACT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

1. *Dining* together
2. Attending *cultural* and *recreational* events
3. *Recruitment* of new students
4. Involvement in new-student *orientation* and/or *convocation*
5. *Academic Advising*
6. *Mentoring* Programs
7. *Conferencing* with students during *office hours*
8. *Experiential* learning (field trips, practicums, service learning, internships)
9. Sponsoring *student clubs and organizations*
10. Involvement in *student residences* (e.g., living-learning communities)
11. Faculty-student *committees*
12. Faculty-student *research* teams
13. Faculty-student *teaching* teams
14. Faculty-student *learning communities*

Appendix C

PROMOTING CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT & SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF **COMMUTER STUDENTS**: ONE-DOZEN PRELIMINARY POSSIBILITIES

1. *Assess who* your commuter students are. For example, what is their class standing (first-year or second-year), from where (and how far) do they commute, and with whom do they live (e.g., parents, roommates, alone)?
2. Publish a **commuter-student directory** (including phone numbers and e-mail addresses) to facilitate, carpooling, networking, and a sense of group identity.
3. Include a special, **commuter-student module or strand within new-student orientation** during which commuters are given the opportunity to meet and interact with each other.
4. Schedule at least one “*commuter awareness*” **event** during the academic year (e.g., commuter appreciation day at which commuters are given free lunch in the student café).
5. Encourage and support the development of a **commuter-student club or council**.
6. Include at least one *commuter student representative* in **student government** and on **campus committees or task forces** where there is student representation.
7. Designate a *commuter team* for participation in intramural sports and other forms of competition (e.g., teams representing each college residence and one or more teams from areas where there are large concentrations of commuters, such as PV, San Pedro, or Torrance).
8. Designate a *campus space/place* for commuters (e.g., section of the café, student center, or learning resource center).
9. Consider *direct mailing* of flyers or a newsletter to commuter students containing the same information that is available to students living in college residences.
10. Occasionally offer **college services/events in off-campus geographical areas that are populated with high concentrations of commuter students** (e.g., dinners at a San Pedro restaurant, movie night at a Torrance theatre, or study sessions at a PV library).
11. Include a *commuter student award* in the end-of-year award ceremonies (e.g., for academic achievement and/or co-curricular contributions).
12. Earmark a small *scholarship or merit-based stipend* for a returning (sophomore) commuter student and deliver this award in a public forum, such as convocation.

Appendix A

RETENTION COMMITTEE: PRIMARY PURPOSES & GOALS

1. To combat the common misperception that student enrollment is synonymous with student recruitment and raise college-wide consciousness that total student enrollment (and the tuition revenue generated thereby) reflects both the number of new students who have been *recruited* to the college *and* the total number of students *retained* by the college.
2. To conduct *assessment* of student retention for the purpose of answering the following questions about early or premature student departure (attrition) from the college:
 - (a) *How many* students are leaving? (e.g., What percentage of academically eligible students do not return to college?)
 - (b) *Who* are the departing students? (e.g., Do they share common characteristics?)
 - (c) *When* are students leaving (e.g., during the term, between fall and spring, between spring and fall)?
 - (d) *Why* are students leaving? (e.g., Are there common causes of student dissatisfaction contributing to student departure?)
3. Promote awareness that effective retention requires a *total institutional response* and that *all* members of the college community can play a significant role in promoting student retention at the college, including:
 - (a) *faculty*—as teachers and advisors,
 - (b) *student development professionals*--as architects of student life programs on campus and in residence,
 - (c) *senior administrators* via their creation, communication, and enforcement of college policies and procedures, and
 - (d) *office support staff* via their interpersonal interactions with students in office settings.
4. Develop effective, proactive *interventions* designed to prevent student attrition and increase the total number of academically eligible students who return to the college each term.