

## Current Retention Theory, Definitions, Practices and Rates

### Introduction/Definitions

The notion of improving student retention rates on college campuses is certainly not new. For decades, researchers have been examining reasons for student's departure or persistence. The reasons to examine student persistence vary, but fundamentally a few commonalities may be found. In today's complex and challenging higher education environment – a burgeoning college-bound population, escalating costs, lagging state support, intense scrutiny from state and federal agencies – colleges and universities must be able to put policies and practices in place to promote student success (Kuh, 2005). Second, it is more cost efficient for institutions to retain the students they currently have than recruit new ones (McGinity, 1989). Third, improved retention rates are the bi-product of an improved quality of student life and learning on college campuses. Fourth, good retention practices make good sense and are generally student-centered. These practices are based on intrusive and intentional interventions that are goal focused. Lastly, studies demonstrate that campuses with higher retention rates are conducting sound educational practices (Pascarella & Terrinzini, 1991).

#### **Student retention may be defined as one of the following:**

- Successful completion of a student's academic goals (Levitz, 2001)
- A student meeting clearly defined educational goal whether that be course credit, career advancement or new skill acquisition (Tinto, 1991)
- Student successfully integrating into the college community, has a successful experience and persists (Bean, 1980).
- Persistence is a function of the match between an individual's motivation and academic ability and his/her academic and social characteristics (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, Hengstler, 1992).
- Student's tendency to drop out of college is inversely related to the degree of direct involvement in the academic and social life of the institution (Astin, 1984).

### Retention as it relates to the campus

#### **Retention Theory**

Several retention theorists have created models to demonstrate retention concepts. Four that are frequently quoted in literature are:

#### **Bean's Theory of Attrition**

Expectations + Actual Experience = If positive, student stay / If negative the student leave

### **Tinto's Integration Theory**

Interaction between the student and his/her environment and the match between individual motivation, academic ability and his/her academic and social characteristics causes a student to stay or depart

### **Astin's Theory of College Persistence**

Student Involvement is key

### **Noel and Levitz Four stage model theory**

Enrollment management, action-orientation, organizational development, and staffing while examining themes of attrition. These themes are: academic unpreparedness, transition or adjustment problems, unrealistic expectations, boredom or uncertainty, or incompatibility

As campuses examine retention rates, it is helpful to look at several different campus resources, services, structures, processes and practices to pinpoint possible challenges in student persistence.

### **Some information that may be helpful is:**

#### **Data:**

- What is the retention rate for first time full-time freshman that returns for their sophomore year?
- What is the retention rate for first-time transfer students that return for their second year?
- What is the return rate of students from their sophomore year to their junior year?
- What is the retention rate for students in special populations?
- What is the four, five and six year graduation rate?

### **Some general information that may be helpful is:**

- What are current campus retention initiatives?
- What is the campus definition of a successful retention program?
- What philosophical or theoretical base is used to define retention?
- What are the additional support services provided to students?

## Comprehensive Retention Solutions

In creating a comprehensive retention plan for campuses, topical areas to be highlighted should include the following:

Developmental academic advising program

Orientation program

First-year experience course

Early alert programs

Established, comprehensive learning communities

Faculty involvement beyond the classroom

Continuous feedback and quality focus groups with students

Sophomore strategies

Internal marketing programs

Recruit-back programs

## Desired State

Effective retention programs are multifaceted in their approach and provide comprehensive services. Several different strategies to complement a comprehensive retention plan are listed below:

### **Retention Planning Principles**

*Recruiting.* Providing students with adequate and accurate information will assist in the selection of an institution that best matches their need, which in turn will increase their chances of persisting.

*Admissions Selectivity.* Academic ability is a strong predictor of student retention and there is clearly a relationship between the degree of admissions selectivity and institutional retention rates.

*Financial Aid.* The type and mix of financial aid provided to a student can have either a positive or negative influence on a student's decision to remain in college depending upon their circumstances and background and cost of tuition, room board and fees.

*Orientation.* Orientation programs are important to the successful integration of students into the academic and social components of the campus environment. They also can be helpful in

developing consonance between student expectations and the actualities of the educational environment.

*Academic Advising.* The importance of academic advising as a retention strategy is well documented in the literature. Advising provides the most significant mechanism by which students can clarify their educational/career goals and relate these goals to academic offerings.

*Sectioning/Placement.* Homogeneous grouping of students based on their level of academic ability is a common educational and retention strategy. Careful placement of students helps ensure that they can compete successfully academically.

*Teaching/Learning.* Academic programs and experiences must be consistent with and relevant to students' educational/career goals. There is no substitute for good instruction in promoting academic integration. Some studies have shown a strong relationship between student learning and increased persistence and likely is one of the strongest strategies to improving retention. Students need assurance and belief that they are gaining the best skills that prepare them for their careers.

*Academic Support.* Retention literature documents that academically underprepared students are more dropout-prone. Institutions should ensure that students enter with, or have the opportunity to acquire, the skills needed for academic success. Learning support programs improve a student's chance of persistence.

*Academic Enrichment.* Academic boredom is a common reason talented students drop out of higher education. Providing enriched or accelerated programs can have a positive impact on the persistence of some of these students.

*Residential Living.* The quality of on-campus residential living is an important element in social integration. Through living/learning communities students become active participants in their academic and social experience.

*Counseling.* With the significant increase in personal counseling usage, this strategy can be important in assisting students to overcome problems that interfere with the degree of academic and non-academic integration.

*Extracurricular Activities.* The literature indicated that significant and meaningful participation in extracurricular activities contributes to student retention.

*Underrepresented Students.* Some racial/ethnic groups experience a higher dropout rate than do others. Special programs and efforts can be successful in reducing the attrition rates for these groups.

*Undecided Students.* Retention research identified this group as being highly dropout-prone. Lack of a clearly defined educational or career goal is often an important reason for a student deciding not to pursue a college degree. Model programs for undecided students have proven to reduce attrition rates.

*Early Alert.* Prediction of dropout-prone students when combined with early warning strategies can increase retention.

*Exit Interviews.* Even though their observed impact on persistence is lower than most other intervention strategies, exit interviews can gather significant information on why students leave and how the institution might change to improve the retention for other students. In addition, a few individuals may remain in the institution as a result of assistance gathered through an exit interview.

*Policies/Procedures.* Colleges and university whose policies and procedures have been redesigned to be student-centered often show improvements in their retention rates.

*Faculty/Staff Development.* The frequency and quality of faculty/staff and student interactions has been shown to contribute positively to student retention, and in-service faculty/staff development efforts can result in a more competent, caring, and concerned group of individuals.

*Internal Marketing Programs.* During the recruitment process campuses communicate with students regularly keeping them informed of changes to occurring on the campus and general information about campus life. Once a student arrives on-campus, internal communications are often stopped. Providing on-going communication can have a positive impact on the persistence of some students because they stay in touch with current campus events and developments.

*Sophomore Strategies.* Campuses are experiencing large drop-out rates after the second year and needing to implement strategies to support second year students. These supports focus around determining an academic major for still deciding students and creating clear career objectives related to the major.

## Retention Rates

ACT provides yearly persistence and graduation rates to serve as a benchmark for institutions. The 2007 rates are as follows:

### Graduation Rates – Public Institutions

Selectivity	AA	BA	MA	Ph.D.
Highly Selective		70.5	72.5	75.8
Selective		71.5	51	54.1
Traditional	23.5	41.1	35.8	41
Liberal	33.8	40.	37.1	28
Open	24.8	17.8	31.9	39.7

\*Graduation in 3 years for Associate Degree; 5 years for BA/BS Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 2007

### Graduation Rates – Private Institutions

Selectivity	AA	BA	MA	Ph.D.
Highly Selective		88.1	80.4	83.2

Selective	82	70.1	63.9	66.6
Traditional	59	45.6	51.8	49.8
Liberal	45	40	37.7	40
Open	44.2	45.4	47.7	59.8

\*Graduation in 3 years for Associate Degree; 5 years for BA/BS Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 2007

**First-to-second year return rates – Public Institutions**

Selectivity	AA	BA	MA	Ph.D.
Highly Selective		89.5	90	92.2
Selective	92	87.7	79.4	82.4
Traditional	63.5	72.7	70.2	73
Liberal	60.3	52.3	66.5	58.8
Open	51	54	65.7	70.6

\*Graduation in 3 years for Associate Degree; 5 years for BA/BS Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 2007

**First-to-second year return rates – Private Institutions**

Selectivity	AA	BA	MA	Ph.D.
Highly Selective		94	90.1	93.9
Selective	79.3	79.5	80.4	83.5
Traditional	78.6	66.7	71.8	72.7
Liberal	56	59.1	57.1	72
Open	44	63.7	69.2	80.5

\*Graduation in 3 years for Associate Degree; 5 years for BA/BS Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 2007

\*\* Adapted from a Noel-Levitz codification paper created in 2001, by this author.

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