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*.

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

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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.
RECOMMENDED REFERENCES & RESOURCES ON STUDENT RETENTION

REFERENCES


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RESOURCES


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.