THE STRUGGLE OF STUDENT RETENTION
Best Practice Approaches for Keeping Students Engaged and Enrolled

HR Hanover Research

Between the ongoing pandemic, uncertain economy, and fluctuating health and safety protocols, many students are questioning whether to continue their higher education plans. Consequently, in 2021, **the overall persistence rate dropped 2 percentage points** for students who began higher education in the fall of 2019. This was the lowest point of persistence since 2012, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

With students considering deferring or stopping their education altogether, universities must focus on retention strategies that highlight the benefit of staying enrolled. Higher education leaders can proactively address decreased retention by understanding and tracking signals of attrition and developing new strategies to keep students engaged and committed.

THE RISING COST OF ATTRITION

In fall 2020, retention rates experienced their largest decline, dropping 0.7 of a percentage point to **66.2%**.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse

The overall persistence rate dropped 2 percentage points to **73.9%** for fall 2019 beginning college students, its lowest level since 2012.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse

The average financial loss attributed to attrition for an undergraduate institution is more than **$9.8 MILLION** per school, based upon tuition of $18,297.

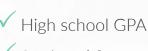*Source: Education Policy Institute*

WHY STUDENTS LEAVE

24% The college provided bad service

20% The college does not care about me

19% It is not worth the time and money

13% Financial issues

Source: Ruffalo

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS AT RISK OF ATTRITION

Many things can influence students' decisions to leave school. The most common factors fall into two categories: academic and non-academic. Indicators from both categories can act as an early warning system to identify at-risk students and to develop programs and offerings that can help with retention.

✓ = Predictor of Persistence   ! = Risk of Attrition

TOP ACADEMIC FACTORS

PREPARATION
- ✓ High school GPA
- ✓ Students' first-year GPA at college
- ✓ Higher SAT scores
- ✓ More rigorous high school coursework (e.g., advanced placement courses)
- ! Enrollment in remedial courses in the first semester of college

PROGRESS
- ✓ The rate at which students' progress to a degree by earning credit hours and passing courses
- ✓ Beginning the first year with a specific intended major and career path
- ✓ Full-time status
- ! Part-time status
- ! Failing to make academic progress
- ! Not declaring a major by the end of the first year

ENGAGEMENT
- ✓ Positive faculty-student interactions
- ✓ Taking advantage of resources that promote academic success (i.e., tutoring, advising)
- ! A poor attendance record

TOP NON-ACADEMIC FACTORS

SOCIAL
- ✓ Established relationships with peers, along with mentors and faculty
- ✓ Participation in student organizations
- ✓ Interventions for minority students to increase their sense of social belonging

FINANCIAL
- ✓ Availability of financial aid
- ✓ Financial aid packages consisting of grants instead of loans for low income and minority students
- ! Excessive employment outside of school
- ! Financial aid that does not cover on-campus housing

DEMOGRAPHIC
- ✓ First-year GPA and performance in first-year math and English courses particularly for minority students
- ! First-generation students

BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING RETENTION
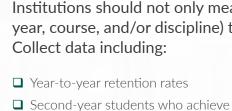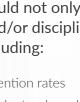
To increase their retention rates, institutions should focus on building concrete and measurable strategies that directly address the causes of student attrition.

1. COLLECT AND ANALYZE STUDENT RETENTION DATA ACROSS DIFFERENT VARIABLES

Institutions should not only measure overall student retention rates, but also analyze them across different dimensions (e.g., by year, course, and/or discipline) to understand which areas have the highest risk of attrition and to develop targeted interventions. Collect data including:

- ☐ Year-to-year retention rates
- ☐ Second-year students who achieve sophomore standing
- ☐ Course withdrawal rates
- ☐ Success rates in the 25 to 35 courses with the largest annual enrollment
- ☐ Success rates in the first credit-bearing math courses
- ☐ Attrition rates for students in different fields
- ☐ Credits completed contingent on the academic milestones and on-track indicators known to affect retention

2. INTERVIEW STUDENTS WHO ARE LEAVING

While some students will choose to leave despite your best efforts, some valuable information can still be collected and used to help drive improvement and to uncover gaps in your offerings. To identify areas for improvement and to uncover gaps in your offerings, ask students who are leaving questions such as:

- ☐ Have you spoken with your advisor or other faculty when contemplating withdrawal?
- ☐ What are the reasons you are choosing to withdraw?
- ☐ What is your assessment of your experience at this institution?
- ☐ Is there a student service you felt was missing from your experience?
- ☐ Did you feel appropriately supported by your professors and school faculty?
- ☐ Are you transferring to another school? Where and why?
- ☐ What are your plans for the future? And how can we assist?

3. ENSURE YOUR STUDENTS HAVE THE SUPPORT THEY NEED

Institutions need to offer support and benefits to keep students engaged with and committed to their current institution. Develop student support strategies that target individual academic, personal, financial, and social variables that affect student persistence, such as:

- ☐ An honors program for academically advanced students
- ☐ Robust academic support for students who need additional assistance
- ☐ Programs designed specifically for first-year students
- ☐ Work opportunities related to their intended major (e.g., internships, volunteer work, experiential learning, service learning)
- ☐ Regular one-on-one advising sessions with professional staff members
- ☐ Training residence hall staff to recognize at-risk students

4. FOCUS ON BUILDING POSITIVE STUDENT-FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

Faculty play a critical role in student return. Students are most likely to persist when they feel a consistent sense of belonging, competence, and social engagement in the classroom. By designing a 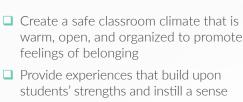relevant and student-centered curriculum, communicating effectively with students, and engaging them in the learning process, faculty members can help raise student retention rates.

- ☐ Create a safe classroom climate that is warm, open, and organized to promote feelings of belonging
- ☐ Provide experiences that build upon students' strengths and instill a sense of purpose
- ☐ Use a variety of assessment instruments that can be readily scored
- ☐ Interact with students. Learn their first names, talk after class, smile, praise performance, and actively respond to create positive faculty-student relationships
- ☐ Strive to understand each student's challenges and potential
- ☐ Ensure that students feel comfortable with materials and teaching styles
- ☐ Identify at-risk students and offer appropriate training and guidance
- ☐ Provide concrete experiences and engage students to process deep learning

5. REASSESS YOUR FINANCIAL AID STRATEGIES

Strategically distributed financial aid can positively affect student return rates. Cost-effective strategies for promoting student retention through financial aid disbursement include:

- ☐ Simplifying the financial aid application process and ensure students have access to financial aid information including guidance around deadlines
- ☐ Targeting financial aid to students with the largest unmet needs
- ☐ Make financial aid contingent on academic milestones and on track indicators

Optimize your program and reduce attrition with data that uncovers students' biggest concerns.