Student Retention:
Root Causes of Student Attrition
&
Systemic Strategies for Promoting Persistence

Retention Council Meeting
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BASELINE ASSESSMENT: DIAGNOSTIC ANALYTICS
• **How many** students are leaving? (What number or percentage of matriculating students completes a degree or program?)

• **When** are students leaving? (What year/term of their college experience)?

• **Who** are leaving? (What particular student groups are most “at risk” for attrition?)

• **Where** are students leaving from? (What departments, majors, and courses)?

• **Where** are the departing students going? (Other majors within the college? Other colleges? Dropping out of higher education?)

• **Why** are students leaving?
Root Causes of Student Attrition: Recurrent Themes

1. Academic Under-Preparedness
Students leave because they’re inadequately prepared to accommodate the academic demands and meet the minimal academic standards of the college/university or academic department, i.e., attrition due to academic dismissal from campus or failure to gain admission to their major of choice.

* Poor Basic Skills (reading, writing, math)
* Ineffective Learning Strategies

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2. Low Initial Commitment
Attrition resulting from weak initial intent to graduate from college in general, from the particular campus at which the student is enrolled, or from lack of commitment to a particular major (field of study).

* Low commitment to college
* Low commitment to your college
* Low commitment to a particular field of study

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3. Low Motivation for Academic Learning
Attrition triggered by lack of student interest in or perceived relevance of their college courses and/or the manner in which college courses are taught.

* Boredom with course content (subject matter)
* Boredom with course delivery (instructional method)

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4. Competing Commitments
Attrition stemming from conflicting commitments or obligations outside of college that “pull away” students’ time, energy, and commitment to college.

* Financial Needs/Responsibilities
* Financial Wants
* Familial Responsibilities/Conflicts
5. Lack of Social Integration
Attrition stemming from insufficient social contact with other members of the college community, resulting in feelings of loneliness, isolation, or marginalization.

* Limited Contact with Faculty & Staff
* Insufficient Interaction with Peers

6. Personal (Psychosocial) Adjustment Issues
Attrition stemming from pressures and stressors associated with transitioning to the culture of higher education and/or mental health issues arising during the college experience.

* Transitional Stress
* Mental Illness

See Appendix (p. 7) for specific retention strategies relating to the above-six roots of student attrition.
The First Year-through-Sophomore Year Experience: 
A **Systematic Timeline** for Delivery of Student-Support Initiatives

**PROACTIVE**

1. *High School* Outreach (e.g., early placement-testing and test preparation to increase college readiness)

2. *Summer Transition/Summer Bridge* Programming

3. Summer *Orientation/Registration*

4. New-Student *Orientation*

5. *Convocation/Matriculation* Ceremony designed to increase institutional identification and campus pride

6. Student-Entry *Assessment* & First-Term *Course Placement*

7. Early Administration of Assessment Instruments Designed to Identify *At-Risk Students* (e.g., MAP Works, College Student Inventory)

8. First-Year *Academic Support* Programming (e.g., first-year academic advising; peer tutoring; supplemental instruction)

9. *First-Year Experience Course* (First-Year Seminar) (College Transition Course)

10. *Curricular* Support Programs (e.g., learning communities; common reading program)

11. *Co-Curricular* Support Programs (e.g., student success workshops; leadership development workshops for first-year student to prepare them for sophomore leadership roles)

12. *Early-Alert/Early-Warning System* (e.g., absenteeism reports during first few weeks of the term)
13. *Midterm-Grade* Reports (e.g., course-grade submissions at midpoint of first term)

14. “Red Flag” procedures to identify student behaviors that suggest intent to leave (e.g., failure to pre-register or renew financial aid)

15. *Second-Term Support Programs* (e.g., spring-term academic success/recovery course for students placed on academic probation for first-term performance; spring-term FYE course)

16. *Exit Interviews/Surveys* (administered to departing students *during* the withdrawal process)

17. *Already-Withdrawn/Departed-Student Surveys* (administered by mail or phone *after* students have withdrawn)

18. *End-of-First-Year Student Satisfaction and/or Student Needs-Assessment Survey* (and comparative analysis of the responses of students who return vs. fail to return for their sophomore year)

19. *End-of-First Year Celebratory Event & Preview of the Sophomore Year Experience* (tied to registration for sophomore year)

20. *Summer Transition Programming* between the First & Second Year (e.g., summer newsletter sent to students during the summer between first and second year to motivate and re-recruit returning sophomores; peer mentors contact students during the summer between their first and second year to keep in touch with potentially returning sophomores)


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*REACTIVE*
Appendix

Seven Recurrent “Root Causes” of Student Attrition & Specific Retention-Promoting Practices

#1.

**ACADEMIC ROOTS OF ATTRITION & RELATED RETENTION STRATEGIES**

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 Remedies/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.

* Promoting early academic skill-development via a first-year seminar (student success or college success course) and/or infusing academic success strategies into the first-year curriculum.

* Collaboration between course instructors and academic support services to promote effective academic referral of students needing academic support.

* **Early-alert (Early-warning)** systems for students’ experiencing initial academic difficulty.

* **Supplemental Instruction (SI):** students enrolled in historically “high-risk courses” that have high failure and withdrawal rates are supported with a student that has previously done well in the course and has received training as a student leader. The student leader attends the course again to serve as a model learner, who takes notes, completes assignments, and facilitates “supplemental” (out-of-class) study sessions with students in the notes who compare notes, discuss reading assignments, predict test questions, and study collaboratively. The extra...
sessions are optional and may or may not be credit-bearing; if they do carry credit, one unit of college credit is the amount usually awarded.

* *Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL):* a variant of SI used in Science, Math, Engineering & Technology (STEM) disciplines in which a trained peer leader who has completed and succeeded in a course conducts a weekly 2-hour workshop with a group of 6-8 students on problem-solving assignments.

* *Structured Learning Assistance (SLA):* a variant of SI that requires students to attend the supplemental learning session, which makes it a more intrusive support program.

* Early identification & recruitment of *academically gifted* students for *honors* programs and *peer tutoring*

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 Remedies/Strategies:

* *Curriculum Development*—promoting the design of “engaging” courses (e.g. interdisciplinary and experiential learning courses)

* *Faculty Development*—promoting the use of “engaging” pedagogy

* Increasing faculty use of engaging pedagogy and engaging courses via:
  a) *faculty-development* programming
  b) *new-faculty* orientation
  c) *faculty-hiring* practices

#2. MOTIVATIONAL ROOTS OF ATTRITION & RELATED RETENTION STRATEGIES

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 Remedies/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 Remedies/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 Remedies/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.
SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL ROOTS OF ATTRITION & RELATED RETENTION STRATEGIES

3.1 LACK OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION
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 Remedies/Strategies: 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 Remedies/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 Remedies/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 OF ATTRITION & RELATED RETENTION STRATEGIES**

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*.

#5.

**ORGANIZATIONAL (ADMINISTRATIVE) ROOTS OF ATTRITION & RELATED RETENTION STRATEGIES**

5.1 *Failure to Receive* *Accurate Information* from the College about *Institutional Policies, Practices, and Procedures*

*Retention Strategies:*

* Deliver information in more *reader-friendly format* (e.g., information on course requirements delivered on easy-to-read flat sheets or brochures, rather than only embedded it in thick catalogues or handbooks)

* Deliver timely information in *electronic modalities* that students may be more familiar with and access more frequently (e.g., websites, personalized e-mail messages, or Facebook)
5.2 Students Perceive the Institution as having a Cumbersome Bureaucracy that Impedes Rather than Promotes Access to Courses and Services

Retention Strategies:

* Create “one-stop centers” where students can access printed or electronic information from multiple offices in the same place—versus giving them the runaround.

* Utilize trained peer information assistants as “air-traffic controllers” who are prepared to supply students with the right information or guide students to the right place at the right time (e.g., via a central peer-resource center or peer-resource booths on campus).

5.3 Lack of institutional structures or processes that allow students to become actively involved or participate fairly (democratically) in college decision-making, particularly with respect to issues involving student life.

Retention Strategies:

* Promote student involvement in campus governance organizations and include student representation on campus committees that have policy-formation influence (e.g., student government, student life committee, or student engagement taskforce).

* Maximize opportunities for student input via campus surveys, opinion polls, and focus groups.

5.4 Lack of coordination and collaboration between the divisions of Academic and Students Affairs, resulting in a segmented or disjointed student experience.

Retention Strategies:

* To ignite dialogue and stimulate collaboration, capitalize on naturally occurring or already existing cross-divisional “intersection points”—i.e., cross-functional areas where Academic and Student Affairs crisscross with respect to administration or education.

Examples:

a) new-student orientation and convocation
b) new-student seminar (“extended” first-year orientation course)
c) academic advising (intersecting with career counseling and personal counseling)
d) practicums, internships, volunteer (service-learning) experiences
e) residential life-based academic programming (e.g., “living-learning” experiences such as tutoring or academic advising conducted in student residences)
f) student leadership development
g) senior-year/sophomore-year programming that prepares students for their transition beyond the college (e.g., career entry, transfer to a 4-year college, or post-graduate education).

* Incorporate courses into the curriculum that integrate student development issues with academic learning.
  Examples: first-year experience course; service-learning courses; senior/sophomore seminar; interdisciplinary courses with experiential components (such as a leadership development course).

* Create structured, current issue-centered opportunities for fruitful interaction between Academic and Student Affairs professionals.
  Example: Form task forces, ad hoc committees, or joint research projects to address topics of mutual interest and concern (e.g., accreditation; assessment; student retention).

* Organize discussion groups or “critical-moment learning teams” of faculty and student affairs professionals after a high-impact event or critical incident has taken place on campus (e.g., racial incident or student suicide).

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GO SHOCKERS!