

Retention and Student Success

Staying on Track with Early Intervention Strategies

RETENTION AND STUDENT SUCCESS. STAYING ON TRACK WITH EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES.

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A sharpened focus on retention, persistence, and graduation has colleges and universities looking for more effective ways to support student success. But even for institutions with a transparent focus on persistence, putting effective programs in place is difficult. Chrissy Coley and Tim Coley, senior consultants with SunGard Higher Education, describe what institutions can do today to design, develop, and launch retention and student success programs that work.

You've probably heard the old adage—in fact, you might have heard it from a professor of yours when you were a freshman in college: "Look to your left. Look to your right. Next year one of you will not be sitting here." There was a time when an institution's prestige was tied to its ability to weed out students—when our attitude about student success was simply sink or swim. Thanks to the work of such scholars as Vincent Tinto, John Gardner, and George Kuh, we are developing a new perspective on student success. Whether we measure that success by persistence to graduation, transfer success, time to degree, or improved learning outcomes, we know that we bear some responsibility for providing students with the support they need to achieve their goals.

But what kind of support? In the past few decades, we've seen a virtual cottage industry of retention initiatives spring up on our campuses—writing centers, remedial curricula, academic resource centers, outreach and engagement programs—the list is a varied and creative one. Yet, in spite of the attention paid to retaining students, we have made very little progress on a national scale. For instance, in their recent book, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*, William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson point to the preponderance of evidence suggesting that, after several decades of robust growth, degree attainment in the U.S. simply leveled off after 1975.

The reality is sobering: in its January 2005 reports, *One Step from the Finish Line* and *Choosing to Improve*, the Education Trust noted that nationally more than one million first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students were beginning their undergraduate careers at four-year colleges and universities each year. However, fewer than four in ten actually achieved their goal of earning a bachelor's degree within four years, and barely six in ten completed their degrees within 6 years. In the intervening years, the numbers have stayed relatively stagnant. The 2009 ACT National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates reports that only 43% of students enrolled at public baccalaureate colleges and universities graduated within 5 years from their original institutions, as did approximately 56% of their peers enrolled at private baccalaureate institutions. Even at flagship public universities, where we would expect to see high levels of degree attainment given the more selective nature of these doctoral-degree granting institutions, only 49% of undergraduate students completed their studies within four years, an additional 24% within five years, and another 4% within six years (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009, p. 32).

Clearly, our efforts to support students to graduation have been less than successful. As policy makers continue to shift their focus from access—as important as that has been to the equitable delivery of education services—to completion, the failure of these efforts is likely to come under increasing scrutiny. Consider their perspective:

- Students who graduate with a degree in hand can expect to earn nearly double of those who complete only a high-school diploma;
- Our economic recovery depends in large part on how well we succeed at delivering education and retraining;
- Building human capital to drive innovation is critical to sustaining our global standing.

New programs like the Obama administration's American Graduation Initiative and the College Access and Completion Innovation Fund bring with them new opportunities, but also a new focus on retention, persistence, and graduation. As that focus sharpens, and the demand for more accountability grows, student success will become a critical factor that will affect funding, reputations, and rankings.

A New Focus on Student Success

When major news outlets are highlighting student retention, you can be sure the topic has people's attention. A unique combination of factors is at play in our renewed focus on student success. Today, accrediting agencies are demanding higher levels of accountability around outcomes, as are policy makers concerned over the value that education delivers. The work of the Spellings Commission during the last administration has spurred movements like the Voluntary System of Accountability and the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN). Several states, including Ohio and Indiana, have responded by tying funding to retention and graduation rates. Other states across the country are watching the results carefully.

But increased scrutiny around outcomes isn't the only reason we are paying closer attention to student success. While our community colleges are seeing increased enrollments due in large part to the demand for retraining during the economic downturn, demographics across the country are shifting rapidly. According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), some parts of the country, particularly the Northeast and Midwest, will experience declines in the number of high school graduates over the course of the next decade, making student success and retention a clear priority. Many Southeast and Western states will see significant growth in the number of high school graduates, particularly first-generation college students who may require additional academic, financial, and social supports to persist to degree completion. These demographic changes bring with them a new reality. Institutions will have to work harder to retain the students they have traditionally enrolled, as well as deliver new kinds of support to new groups of students. Finding better ways to retain and progress students, then, is something we owe to everyone seeking an education from our institutions.

The need for better retention strategies is clear. And we have been talking about retention since Vincent Tinto's groundbreaking work, *Leaving College, Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, was first published in 1987. As Tinto acknowledges in the foreword to *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success*, edited by Alan Seidman and published in 2005:

Research on student retention is voluminous...[but] despite all the research that has been conducted to date, little work has been devoted to the development of a model of student persistence that would provide guidelines to institutions for creating policies, practices, and programs to enhance student success...In this regard a significant gap remains between what researchers know about the nature of student retention and what practitioners need to know to enhance student retention.

The gap between theory and execution is echoed in these findings from ACT's 2004 report, "What Works in Student Retention":

- Only 51.7% of campuses have identified an individual responsible for coordinating retention strategies.
- Only 47.2% of campuses have established an improvement goal for retention of students from the first to second year.
- Only 33.1% of campuses have established a goal for improved degree completion.

Even at those institutions with a transparent focus on persistence, we find that "moving the needle" is still difficult. A survey conducted by SunGard Higher Education indicated a perception by academic administrators that most at-risk students don't take advantage of available support services even when they are aware of them. We also know that even when institutions are able to identify at-risk students, resources for delivering appropriate interventions are limited. And when the institution has no systematic way to identify at-risk students early enough to make a real impact on persistence, those problems are only compounded.

From Theory to Execution

But the news is not all bad. Some colleges and universities are doing better than others when it comes to defining and supporting student success.

According to the Education Trust's "College Results Online," Macalester College combined a first-year seminar and community service opportunities with diversity programs and study abroad options, among other things, to realize a 94% retention rate. Results like these are not restricted to small, private colleges. With a retention rate of 87%, the University of South Carolina has demonstrated that even large, public institutions can improve student success with a variety of learning and support programs and mentoring initiatives. (ACT 2009, National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates).

What sets these institutions apart? We think, in part, they have been able to find ways to bridge the gap between theory and execution by clearly defining the factors contributing to better retention and graduation and by engaging faculty, administrators, and students alike in a shared goal. That is, while the programs they have created to support student success vary, each of these institutions has made a visible, and indeed measurable, commitment to student success.

That commitment represents a sea change in how higher education views student success. Today a substantial body of research demonstrates that what colleges and universities do about student success matters. And, increasingly, administrators and faculty understand that doing something early matters even more.

Redefining "Early"

Traditionally, colleges and universities have used final grades to signal academic success. But we know that even by midterm, time is already running out for meaningful interventions. Today, we have better data about the factors that contribute to student success or student failure. And we are using that data to develop early intervention programs that can help get students back on track early.

In order to succeed, students need to be supported both academically and socially. And we have made progress in both areas. We know that early academic achievement is a predictor of future success. With that in mind, we have created freshman seminars, developed writing centers, established academic support centers, and experimented with peer tutoring. We also know that students who engage fully in the life of the institution thrive. So we have established learning communities, improved advising, and established bridge programs that recognize the critical importance of a student's first year.

We have also gotten better at identifying the students who would benefit the most from these programs. We know how to look for red flags: absenteeism, weak writing and math skills, poor grades, changes in behavior. We know what social constraints our students will find most challenging: finding peers, struggling economically, juggling family responsibilities. Predictive modeling can draw on pre-enrollment data to help us identify at-risk candidates even before they arrive on campus. And we are putting tools in place to monitor students more consistently and to respond more quickly to what we see and hear. Has a student already missed classes in her first two weeks or performed inadequately on a test or quiz? Has she reported feeling overwhelmed to her Resident Assistant? Has she failed to engage in your course management system (CMS) as early or often as you would have expected? By anticipating the needs of our students, we can reach out with appropriate resources—perhaps a study group, or a peer support program, or even a half-hour of technical support—rather than expecting our students, who may not know that such support even exists, to stumble into it on their own.

Research calling for this kind of "intrusive" advising—active, engaged, and early institutional support—is ubiquitous. How, then, can we design, develop, and deploy retention strategies that recognize and foster the potential of all students?

1. Establish a Shared Vision of Student Success

We all want our students to succeed. And while discrete departments across the institution can have a real impact on student success, designing and implementing a comprehensive institutional strategy means moving beyond the “hunches” many of your stakeholders have about what drives student success. Establishing a shared vision of student success and communicating that vision across your campus means you can more effectively align resources to support defined goals.

Moving from theory to action will mean asking yourselves some very specific questions:

- What is the problem we want to solve? Do we want to improve retention year to year? Semester to semester? Do we want to improve graduation rates overall? Do we need to focus on a particular student cohort or academic program?
- How do we define “at risk”? What criteria will you use to assess who is at risk and who isn’t? Missed classes? Poor test results? Lack of CMS activity?
- What defines student success? How will you know if your efforts have been successful?
- Do our institutional leaders (president, provost, vice presidents, deans) communicate their vision for student persistence to degree completion to campus constituents, lay out expectations for supporting student learning and success, and allocate resources to ensure goals are achieved?

The University of South Carolina launched what would be an award-winning student success initiative after examining the relationships among first-year student GPAs, hours earned, and graduation rate and determining that it needed to better support first-year success. The University was able to quickly define risk by focusing on students enrolled in historically difficult courses as well as on students who were either missing classes or otherwise disengaged from their studies. To make a difference, the university invested in supplemental instruction, early intervention initiatives, and other forms of academic and peer support. The University Retention Committee ensured the institution’s vision was communicated across campus. Success, defined by improved GPAs and a healthy transition to university life, was measurable and repeatable. (NASPA 2008 Excellence Awards).

2. Focus on What Successful Students Do

In *Student Success in College*, authors George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Schuh, and Elizabeth Whitt remind us that successful retention programs identify and communicate what successful students do. Many students come to college with little understanding of what it takes to succeed; they make an assumption that class attendance is optional, or that the level of effort that got them through high school will be sufficient for college work. First-generation and low-income students in particular may lack the cultural capital to know how to navigate complex campus systems. Other students are unfamiliar with the services available to them, whether that is your library’s reference desk, your writing center, study groups, tutors, or supplemental instruction. And often, students enrolling in a full time course of study have to learn, or relearn, what it takes to manage finances, time, and family obligations.

If you want your students to emulate successful behavior, your institution needs to be asking these questions:

- Do our students know what GPA they need to earn and the courses they need to take to maintain academic good standing, to pursue a major program of study, and to maintain scholarships and financial aid?
- Do our students know what resources are available on campus?
- How can the campus use convocation, orientation, and the first-year seminar to articulate expectations?
- What opportunities exist to engage students in educationally purposeful activities both in and out of the classroom?

At the University of South Carolina, every first year student receives a letter that emphasizes the importance of class participation, discusses appropriate levels of effort outside of class, and outlines resources available to students on campus. Through its Creating Academic Responsibility (CAR) program, participating instructors note the importance of class attendance in their syllabi and refer students with excessive absences to a retention program coordinator. The CAR program also produces a brochure to provide every student and faculty member on campus with a working knowledge of campus resources. (NASPA 2008 Excellence Awards).

3. Determine an Intervention Strategy

In our experience schools that create successful campus-wide retention programs have determined a clear methodology to define and identify “at-risk” students, to reach out to students with appropriate resources and support, and to track and monitor student engagement. Intervention strategies often involve faculty and staff who may be involved in formal referral programs or who may help deliver appropriate resources.

Early intervention is key to helping students before problems become too overwhelming to handle. For many students, knowing that someone in the institution cares about how they are performing is itself a powerful motivator. And helping students establish a solid academic and social foundation for future success is, or should be, an integral part of an institution’s core mission.

How can your institution implement early intervention programs that make a difference? To begin, you can ask these questions:

- What is our institution’s philosophy of student success? How does early intervention fit with this vision?
- What is the earliest point at which we know a student is struggling?
- What criteria do we use to determine whether a student is off track? Class attendance, grades, midterms, pre-registration information, degree audits, financial aid information?
- Who should reach out to the student?
- How can technology facilitate timely and effective communication with our students?
- How can technology help us monitor academic progress or identify “red flags” that indicate a student may be experiencing problems?

By studying retention rates, examining best practices at other institutions, and reviewing the literature on student success, administrators at the University of South Carolina determined that they needed to redefine “early” to include the first two weeks of classes and used class absence as a fundamental criterion for intervention. The Creating Academic Responsibility (CAR) initiative, launched in 2005, has become a key tactic in a comprehensive program that delivers an array of options to students identified by faculty as needing additional support. Interventions include face-to-face meetings with residence life staff, phone calls with Student Success Center representatives, class absence discussion groups through the Counseling Center, and online academic networking. (NASPA 2008 Excellence Awards).

The move to redefine what constitutes “early” is happening on other campuses as well. At Purdue University, for example, the campus combined data signaling lack of engagement in the school’s course management system with poor grades on early course assignments to drive a “stop/go” early alert system that faculty and students alike have enthusiastically embraced.

4. Start Small and Grow

Chances are your institution already has programs and initiatives in place to support student success. Finding those programs and evaluating what works and what doesn’t will be critical as you begin to build a more strategic approach to student retention and progression. Starting small—by course, by department, by program, by major—provides a way for you to put systems into place—referral programs, intervention tactics, measures of success, reporting mechanisms—for more comprehensive efforts. If you can foster a model program, communicate its successes to other parts of your campus, and build enthusiasm for it, you can more successfully grow that program in ways that will reach every student on your campus with the appropriate support and outreach.

When evaluating programs that might be good “incubator” candidates, you should consider some of the following questions:

- Where do we want to begin? At the level of our school or college? Department? Major? First-Year Studies?
- Who are our allies there?
- How will we measure success?
- How can this program improve and grow?

The University of South Carolina’s Student Success Center can trace its roots back to two pilot programs in Fall 2005, one for supplemental instruction in a few introductory math and science courses, and one for intervening with students enrolled in sections of the University 101 first-year seminar based on excessive class absences (which later became the Creating Academic Responsibility Initiative). Based on the success of these initiatives, the University allocated funds to establish the Student Success Center, which began its operations in Fall 2006. The mission of the Center is “to coordinate an intentionally-designed, comprehensive array of programs, resources, and services that guide students to degree completion through promoting academic goal-setting and skill development, personal transition to the university setting, and effective decision-making.” (University of South Carolina Student Success Center). It also includes special programs for transfer students, out-of-state students, and students on academic probation.

Purdue University’s early alert system, Signals, also started small, as a model program in a single biology class in 2007. By fall 2009, Signals was supporting over 6,000 students.

5. Build Bridges

To make successful pilot programs into comprehensive, campus-wide student success initiatives you will need the cooperation of everyone across your campus. Identifying at-risk students can begin with class absences, but it shouldn’t end there. Taking a comprehensive approach to student success means finding a way to communicate with every campus stakeholder who holds a piece of the puzzle. And by connecting what is happening inside the classroom with what is happening outside of it, we can provide not one, but multiple safety nets for our students. To build student success initiatives that consider and value the full student experience, collaboration will be key. Student affairs, financial aid, residence life, academic affairs—all of these functions and more play a role in student success. A campus-wide student success strategy will need to create common goals, consistent messages, and appropriate incentives to ensure the participation of all of these stakeholders. To start building bridges on your campus, you may want to consider:

- What departments or academic units are already collaborating on our campus?
- Are there other stakeholders who need to be at the table?
- What opportunities exist to synthesize academic and student affairs data?
- What opportunities exist to integrate academic and student affairs resources?
- What incentives are there for collaboration?

Initiatives at the University of South Carolina are the result of collaboration among student affairs, academic affairs, enrollment management, institutional research, residence life, and the counseling center. The University Retention Committee fosters collaboration by involving faculty, staff, administrators, and students in regular conversations about student learning and success. Those conversations result in actionable plans to address key issues. For example, the Financial Aid Office collaborated with the Student Success Center and Residence Life in developing an academic support initiative for students who were failing to maintain satisfactory academic progress. Undergraduate Admissions collaborated with the Student Success Center in developing bridge programs for students transferring from the state’s community college system.

6. Use data, don't just collect it.

Using good data is essential in guiding a retention strategy, monitoring students' progress, assessing program effectiveness, and directing decisions and resource allocations. A successful approach to student success depends on good data, and most academics will dismiss you unless you approach them with statistics that support your goals. Luckily, there are plenty available. Start with existing scholarship, some of it outlined in this paper, some available at sites such as the Education Department's Toolbox Revisited. Identify sources and repositories of data—on your campus, in your state, and elsewhere. Solicit the help of your institutional researchers to identify an institution-specific at-risk model. How will success be defined? A decrease in DFW rates? An increase in retention rates? Your institutional research department can help you find the resources you need to pull the right data and format the right reports. Remember to use your data to move more confidently toward your student retention goals. Good data can help us focus our efforts on the most promising tactics and strategically allocate sometimes scarce resources. To start thinking about a data strategy to support your success and retention efforts, you might want to consider the following questions.

- What data are most important for understanding student persistence, learning, and success?
- What data governance structure is in place?
- Do we have access to timely, quality data that presents "one version of the truth?"
- How are data used for decision-making, program development, and resource allocation?
- How can technology facilitate relevant reports and records to help campus improve services to students?
- How can technology provide access to concise, graphical displays of point-in-time and trend data through dashboards and scorecards?

Assessment has served as the foundation of the University of South Carolina's Student Success Center. Data gathered in May 2005 in collaboration with Institutional Research indicated students not persisting to graduation took fewer credit hours and had lower first-year GPAs in their first year than those who graduated in 6 years. This data served as the basis for the development of centralized academic support resources beginning during a student's first year. Additionally, retention rates demonstrated that transfer students and out-of-state students were retained at lower rates than in-state students and first time, full time students, further supporting the Center's mission to focus on guiding students to degree completion. By collecting both qualitative and quantitative data (including DFW rates in high risk courses, attendance rates, and student/faculty feedback), Student Success Center programs improve each semester and demonstrate to administrators, faculty, staff, and students the benefits of its programs.

Student Success Advisory Services

Student success is one of the most visible markers of your institution's ability to meet increased demands for better accountability. Given the increased scrutiny being brought to bear on student outcomes today, designing a coordinated institution-wide approach that breaks down silos, establishes strategic objectives, and recognizes the right tactics to identify and support at-risk students is imperative. SunGard Higher Education's Student Success and Retention Planning Service provides institutional leadership with a comprehensive roadmap and tactical approach aligned to your unique institutional goals in the areas of student success, retention, and persistence to degree completion. Designed to help you identify evidence-based, well-coordinated approaches that support your institution's mission, these services help you align and leverage your existing resources and programs, create systems to help you find at-risk students and intervene with appropriate and timely support, and make measurable — and repeatable — improvement to your student success initiatives. For more information visit us online at www.sungardhe.com/success.

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EWHT-050 (03/10)

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