

Eduventures Sponsored Thought Leadership Initiative

Lessons from Retention High Performers: Successful Strategies and Best Practices

Sponsored by PlattForm, EBI-MAP Works,
and Tuition Management Systems
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ABOUT OUR SPONSORS

Tuition Management Systems



Tuition Management Systems is dedicated to helping families afford education and helping schools prosper. We help over 700 member schools nationwide ensure a quality experience and financial fit for students coupled with a fully integrated payment solution. TMS also delivers resources and expertise needed to generate cost savings and workload reduction. We are ready to help students make informed decisions with industry unique affordability counseling, comprehensive billing, tailored payment options, payment processing and acceptance, 1098-T processing and refund disbursements.

See Tuition Management Systems' perspective on page 20.

PlattForm



Since 1989, PlattForm has set the standard of excellence in marketing and enrollment solutions for colleges and universities worldwide. Headquartered in Kansas City, the firm boasts an internal staff of more than 550 industry experts. Forming partnerships with higher education institutions of all types, PlattForm provides optimal marketing performance through AttriBrand, a proprietary approach that integrates research, creative and channel-agnostic media planning with multichannel analytics and attribution. PlattForm's Academic Program Management (APM) suite of services represents a closer collaboration for enhanced student outcomes, spanning the entire educational journey from students' first awareness of an institution to enrollment through graduation and career planning.

See PlattForm's perspective on page 15.

EBI-MAP Works



EBI MAP-Works, part of Macmillan New Ventures, has been collaborating with professional organizations since 1994 to build a library of over 60 academic and student affairs assessments, all rooted in accreditation and professional standards. The output of these assessments includes longitudinal data, the ability to benchmark against peer institutions, and dashboards that enable rapid identification of specific program issues and areas that need to be addressed first. The MAP-Works Student Retention System, originally developed in conjunction with Ball State University, combines predictive analytics with student data—both historical and current—to provide a continuous cycle of communication across departments, visually informing faculty and staff of at-risk students, facilitating early intervention strategies and measurable results.

See EBI-MAP Works' perspective on page 11.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For institutional leaders seeking stability in an evolving landscape, two factors have made retention a top priority. Overall undergraduate headcount is declining as enrollments return to pre-boom levels, and federal and state policymakers are focusing closely on educational attainment and outcomes. Given the evident cost of attrition, sound strategies to identify high-risk students and support them through graduation will support your bottom line. An investment in retention pays for itself by securing the tuition revenue that would otherwise be lost to student attrition. This report outlines successful practices among high-performing institutions that you may consider as you develop your institution's retention management strategy.

- At high-performing institutions, the directive to focus on retention came from the president and the board of directors. These campus leaders have the purview to devise campus-wide strategies that align with the broader institutional mission and initiatives.
- Depending on your institution's mission and how retention ranks relative to other institutional objectives, recruiting for fit may or may not be possible. In either case, identifying attrition indicators and assessing students' likelihood to succeed during recruitment can support a proactive early warning and intervention system.
- An effective retention management strategy is built on rich, sound data. To devise a more centralized approach to data reporting, conduct a data audit. Then, collect and analyze your data early and often to surface issues as they arise and allow stakeholders across campus to flag and support students at risk of dropping out.
- Knowing which students are most at risk for attrition enables you to maximize resources by tailoring retention programs to these students and their needs. For students most at risk of attrition, it may make sense to intervene through remedial education programs before they arrive on campus.
- Anyone who impacts the student experience, from residential life and financial aid to faculty and fellow students, should be involved in the retention process. Promote a campus culture that celebrates student success and encourages collaboration. The stronger your net, the less likely students are to fall through the holes.

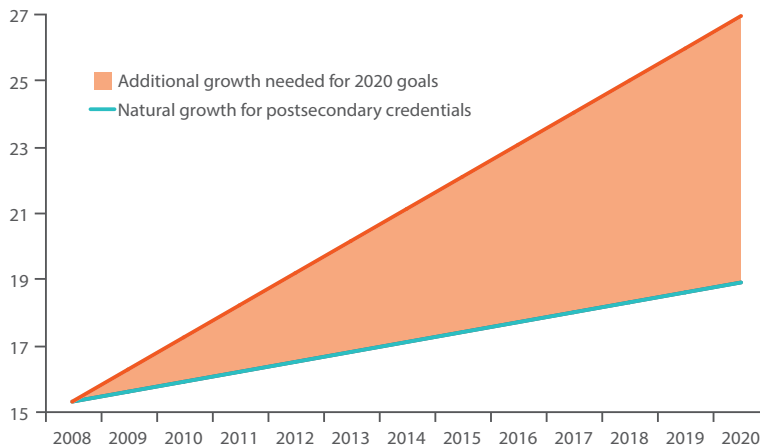
WHY IS RETENTION IMPORTANT?

As those working in colleges and universities across the country are keenly aware, public scrutiny on the value of higher education has been increasing over the last several years. One consequence of this scrutiny has been federal and state policymakers exploring new measures to hold institutions accountable for their performance and outcomes. President Obama's 2020 goal to increase degree attainment challenges institutions to not only expand the overall headcount, but also to retain students through to completion. At the same time, competition for enrollments among institutions is heating up as the overall population returns to pre-boom levels and the overall student headcount declines, underscoring the importance of retention for institutions looking to make the most of their recruitment dollars. While the trend toward performance-based funding models at the state level will have the biggest impact on public

institutions, the possibility of the federal government adopting a similar model, driven by completion rates and students served, would put both private and public institutions at risk of losing access to federal funding and financial aid. Even if these federal measures do not pass, institutions with poor retention or completion rates may soon find it increasingly difficult to recruit students, as President Obama’s College Scorecard highlights such metrics in an effort to increase transparency and provide prospective students with reliable information on the return on their educational investments. Compounding the challenge at hand, minority students and adult learners, two populations that have historically been at greater risk of dropping out, will account for a greater percentage of prospective students within the next decade. If institutions are going to enroll and serve these students effectively, they will need to implement proactive retention strategies that support students from enrollment through graduation. Doing so will not only improve national graduation rates, but it will also improve institutions’ operational efficiency, as retaining students secures revenue and minimizes recruitment spending.

Increasing emphasis on retention in the political arena puts institutions in the hot seat. In 2010, President Obama announced an ambitious goal of 60% degree attainment among adults between the ages of 25 and 34 by 2020. With an eye toward improved workforce preparation and international standing, the goal would require increasing degree attainment by over 10 million between 2008 and 2020, far beyond the natural growth in degree attainment at the 2008 completion rate.¹

Figure 1. Additional Growth Needed to Reach 2020 Goal



SOURCE: “College Completion Tool Kit,” U.S. Department of Education, 2011.

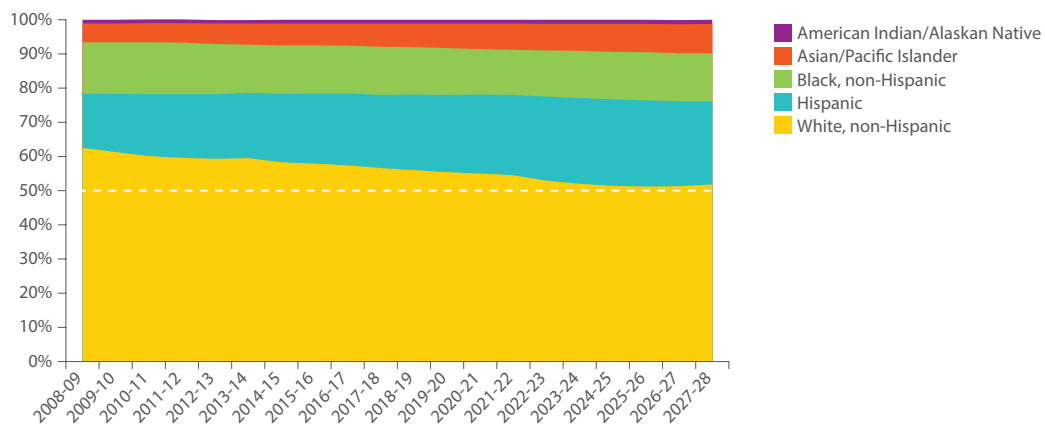
Source: Eduventures, Inc.

If degree attainment is the end goal, then retention is a crucial part of higher education’s ability to meet that goal. The need to expand the overall headcount is inescapable. What institutions can control is how much of a burden this policy presents: the more students institutions retain, the fewer they will have to recruit and enroll in order to meet their overall enrollment and graduation goals. Beyond these practical considerations, retention has also come to the forefront of conversations about higher education’s value, thanks in part to the

Obama Administration’s rollout of the College Scorecard. By calling for greater transparency of institutional outcomes, including graduation rates, President Obama hopes to provide students and families with the information they need to make informed decisions about their educational investments.² State-level policies are taking this one step further; so far, twenty-five states have adopted performance-based models that allocate funding based on indicators such as completion rates, time to degree, the number of degrees awarded, and the number of minority students served.³ While retention is not explicitly tracked in all of these models, a successful retention strategy feeds several of these factors. With five more states developing performance-based funding models, this trend directly impacts public institutions that depend on state funding to operate. The trend toward performance-based models may come to impact private institutions as well, as there is talk at the federal level of tying federal financial aid to institutional performance metrics, including student completion rates.⁴ If this reform passes, public and private institutions alike will need to be ahead of the curve in order to maintain the funding they and their students have come to rely on.

Demographic shifts will increase competition for students, as well as require support for a growing proportion of historically at-risk populations. After a period of significant expansion tied to overall population growth, higher education is returning to pre-boom enrollment levels. In the fall of 2013, this recalibration was manifested by a 1.5% decline in enrollments nationwide.⁵ Population trends have been uneven, with some regions experiencing greater declines than others. This has heightened competition in regions with the greatest declines, as students tend to enroll in programs located within five hours of home.⁶ With fewer students enrolling, institutions can no longer afford not to prioritize retention, as there will no longer be a large pipeline of new recruits to replace those that drop or stop out along the way. At the same time, minority populations that have historically been at the greatest risk of dropping out will represent a larger portion of prospective students. By 2025, the minority population will account for nearly 50% of high school graduates in the United States, compared to 38% in 2008-9. The percentage of Hispanic students alone will grow by over 9% from 2008-09 to 2024-25.⁷

Figure 2. U.S. Public High School Graduates by Race/Ethnicity

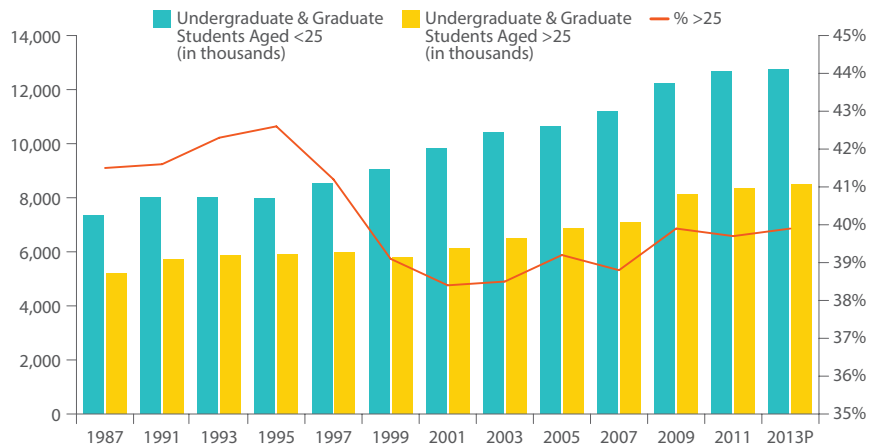


SOURCE: “Knocking at the College Door,” *Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*, 2012.
NOTE: 2008-9 figures are actual; 2009-10 to 2027-28 figures are projections.

Source: Eduventures, Inc.

While college enrollment among minority populations is increasing, growth is not fast enough to make up for the educational gap among underrepresented minority students. As of 2011, minority students accounted for about 30% of fall enrollments, marking a 5% increase from 2004 enrollment levels.⁸ In addition to minority students, transfer student enrollments will grow. As of 2012, the National Student Clearinghouse estimated that one-third of students switch institutions at least once before earning a degree.⁹ Adult learner enrollments will also increase as the higher education market ages for the first time in over a decade. While undergraduate and graduate students under the age of 25 still account for the largest portion of the market, in 2009 the proportion of students age 25 and older grew to approach 40% for the first time since the late 1990s.¹⁰ This rebound is expected to continue through 2022, when Eduventures projects that students age 25 and older will account for 42% of enrollments overall.¹¹ For institutions that want to expand their pipeline of prospective students, both non-enrolling minority students and adult learners present opportune segments of the undergraduate market. Traditionally, students within each of these populations have been at higher risk of dropping out, necessitating greater institutional efforts to support and retain them through graduation. If institutions are going to contribute to ambitious national degree attainment goals and grow enrollments by attracting non-enrolling minority students, sound strategies to recruit and serve these students will be crucial.

Figure 3. Age of the Overall Student Body, 1987-2013



SOURCE: "Projections of Education Statistics to 2022," National Center for Education Statistics, 2014. Eduventures analysis.

Source: Eduventures, Inc.

Tuition-dependent institutions should treat retention as a source of revenue. In the 2014 update of the Eduventures national benchmarking study of admissions operations, we found that the average cost to recruit a student was \$2,552.¹² Each time a student drops out, the

institution not only loses the tuition revenue tied to his or her enrollment, but also must spend an additional \$2,552 to recruit another student in his or her place. Institutions can calculate the dollars lost to attrition using the following formula:¹³

$$CSF1 = (P \times A) \times T$$

In this formula, the “Customer Service Factor 1” is equal to the total school population (P) multiplied by the annualized, institution-wide attrition rate (A). The product of these figures represents the students lost annually, which, when multiplied by the annualized tuition rate, reveals the cost of attrition at a given institution. For example, an institution with 5,000 students and an annualized attrition rate of 39.6% across all four class years would lose 1,980 students. When tied back to lost tuition revenue, these students would represent a \$25,740,000 loss to the institution.

Table 1. Financial Impact of Student Attrition

Variable	Definition	Example Figures
P	Total student population	5,000
A	Annualized, institution-wide attrition rate	39.6%
T	Tuition	\$13,000

$$CSF1 = (P \times A) \times T$$

$$CSF1 = (5,000 \times 39.6\%) \times \$13,000$$

$$CSF1 = (1,980) \times \$13,000$$

$$CSF1 = \$25,740,000$$

This obviously represents a significant loss for the institution, and it can be avoided. By taking a proactive approach that increases the annualized retention rate, institutions can flip this formula to reflect the revenue secured through retention. In the same example of an institution with 5,000 students, a 5% increase in retention would represent 250 students who remained enrolled from one year to the next. With the same annualized tuition rate of \$13,000, this 5% increase would therefore yield \$3,250,000 in revenue that the institution would have lost had it not invested to improve retention. Looking at retention as an opportunity to stabilize revenue streams grounds sometimes lofty policy objectives in the very practical impact of retention on institutional operations and financial goals.

HOW DO WE IDENTIFY HIGH PERFORMERS?

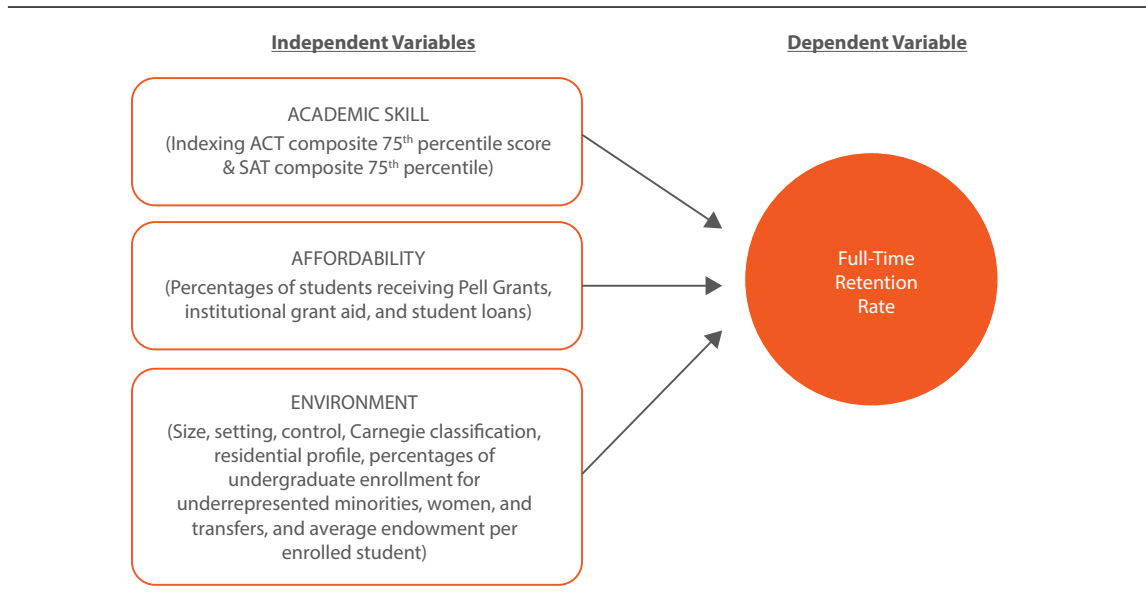
In 2013, we set out to provide institutions with a realistic barometer of their retention performance based on two factors: a comparison of their retention practices with other colleges and universities and analysis of their retention outcomes based on the unique attributes of each campus. To do so, we leveraged a three-part methodology. First, we identified common retention practices among institutions by student population. We then constructed a model that predicted institutions’ retention rates based on academics, affordability, and social factors. By comparing these predictions to institutions’ actual retention rates, we determined which institutions were high-performing and which were underperforming. We are currently

developing case studies of five high-performing institutions to understand the practices that drive their success.

Part I: Survey institutions on common retention practices. In Part I, between April and June 2013, we conducted a national survey to identify common retention practices at institutions by student population. In total, 74 institutions completed the survey: 34% were public, 61% were private, and 5% were for-profit. A high-level summary of these trends can be found in the “How Do Institutions Approach Retention?” section of this report.

Part II: Score institutions’ performance relative to predicted retention rate. In Part II, we devised a linear regression to generate a predicted full-time, first-year retention rate. Based on the understanding that retention management involves active monitoring and intervention in academic support, debt management, and social support, we hypothesized that an institution’s retention rate could be predicted by analyzing IPEDS data related to academics, affordability, and social environment. In these categories, the model examined the variables represented in Figure 4, below.

Figure 4. Variables in Retention Rate Prediction Model



Source: Eduventures, Inc.

By comparing these predicted retention rates to the actual retention rates as reported to IPEDS, we identified which institutions were outperforming our predictions, as well as which were underperforming. Administrators curious about how their institutions performed relative to our predictions can visit our website at www.eduventures.com/retention.¹⁴

Part III: Determine what programs contribute to the success of high-performing institutions.

In Part III, we interviewed provosts, vice presidents, and directors of enrollment or academic affairs at a selection of high-performing institutions to understand the programs that drive their retention strategies. While identifying prospective interviewees, we attempted to maintain a balance of geographic setting, student body size, and institutional control. We spoke with retention managers from the five high-performing institutions listed below. From these conversations, we will produce case studies that present the practices that have been particularly effective. Common themes from these conversations are also outlined in the “Strategies for Improving Retention” section of this report.

Table 2. Institutions Examined in Part III Case Studies

Institution	Location	Control	Student Population	Student Profile
California State University, San Bernardino	San Bernardino, CA (midsize city)	Public	18,234	76% age 24 and younger; 98% in-state; 52% Hispanic/ Latino
Coker College	Hartsville, SC (distant town)	Private	1,163	64% age 24 and younger; 69% in-state; 22% out-of-state; 40% black/African-American
Dominican University	River Forest, IL (large suburb)	Private	3,589	90% age 24 and younger; 88% in-state; 48% white; 34% Hispanic/ Latino
Elizabeth City State University	Elizabeth City, NC (distant town)	Public	2,878	82% age 24 and under; 85% in-state; 73% black/African American
Regis University*	Denver, CO (large city)	Private	10,683	64% age 25 and older; 56% in-state; 44% out-of-state; 60% white; 16% Hispanic/ Latino

SOURCE: “College Navigator,” *National Center for Education Statistics*, 2014.
 *Regis University case study conducted on the College for Professional Studies.

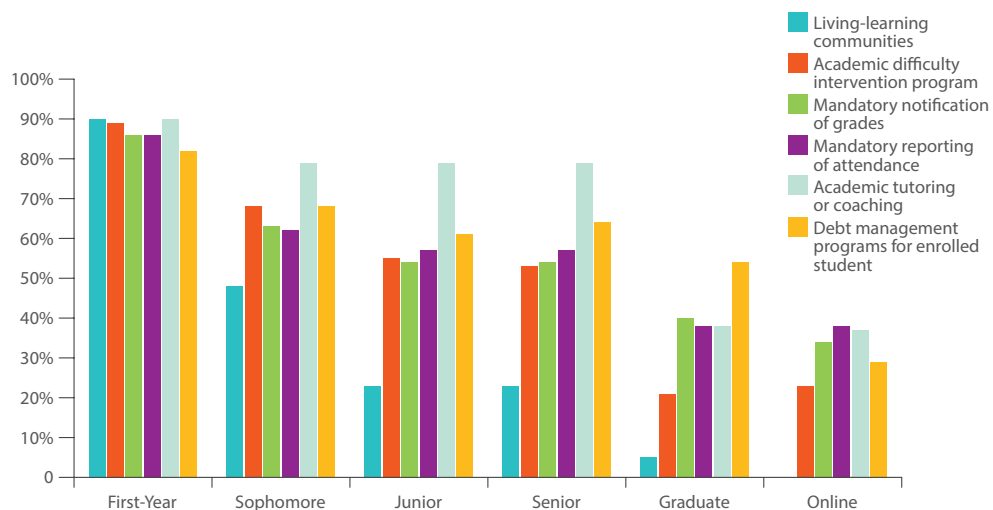
HOW DO INSTITUTIONS APPROACH RETENTION?

At the majority of surveyed institutions, retention management tends to be decentralized or conducted by a committee. This trend gives rise to two major issues. First, it creates inconsistencies in data collection, as each office collects data according to its needs. Second, it means that no one on campus truly owns retention as an institutional objective. In their current retention practices, responding institutions focus on first-year students, with the availability of retention programs diminishing for sophomores and upperclassmen. While this approach accounts for the majority of students who leave college, it leaves gaps in support for growing student populations, namely online and transfer students. Although institutions do gather data through early-warning systems, their primary feedback source is student surveys. This feedback could be helpful in identifying opportunities to intervene, but institutions most commonly conduct exit surveys, which offer little opportunity to influence students’ decisions to drop out.

Retention management tends to be decentralized or managed by a committee. In our study of existing retention practices, we found that just 32% of surveyed institutions had a full-time position dedicated primarily to retention management, and 64% had a retention committee (respondents could select both answers). Among institutions with a full-time employee dedicated to retention, 43% reported this employee was at the director level, while 24% reported it was a senior administrator, and 10% reported it was at the dean level. Several of the institutions with a senior administrator in charge of retention referred to a vice president or provost whose title indicated that his or her role clearly focused on other responsibilities. More strikingly, 23% of responding institutions had neither a full-time employee nor a committee managing retention. At these institutions, retention efforts were either decentralized (50%) or managed by a senior administrator (39%). This trend toward decentralization is particularly problematic; in our experience advising institutions on retention strategies, we have seen that “when everyone owns retention, no one owns it.” As we will discuss in the “Collect and Analyze Data” section of this report, a decentralized approach makes data collection and student tracking especially difficult and creates operational inefficiencies that would be easily mitigated through a cohesive, campus-wide approach.

Retention programs focus on first-year students. Because most student attrition happens during a student’s first year, institutions tend to focus their retention initiatives on first-year students. In our survey of common retention programs, we found that retention programs taper off as students become sophomores and then upperclassmen. At most institutions, however, the number of students who progress into their sophomore year is lower than the number of students who ultimately earn a degree, indicating that attrition continues after the first year. Where at least one retention program is in place for non-first-year students, these programs tend to be continuations of programs introduced in the first year. While these programs likely help, institutions should examine the factors that drive student attrition beyond the first year and consider launching dedicated retention programs to address these causes.

Figure 5. Ongoing Retention Programs at Surveyed Institutions



Source: “Common Retention Practices.” *Eduventures*, 2013.

Source: Eduventures, Inc.

Meanwhile, support gaps persist for other growing student populations. While institutions are slightly more likely to offer at least one program for transfer students (78%) than upperclassmen (75%), the transfer programs offered tend to be ongoing programs, rather than transfer-specific academic and social transition programs. As more students transfer from two-year to four-year institutions in search of a more affordable path to completion, supporting these students' transitions will become especially important for institutions prioritizing retention. Despite the growing trend toward online delivery, few providers have retention programs in place for online students. As more students pursue courses or full degrees online, this lack of support will quickly catch up with institutions. If online is not already mainstream, it will be soon; we estimate that by 2020, online students will account for 20% of the total higher education headcount, compared to 15% in 2013.¹⁵ Institutions can no longer afford to approach online student retention complacently and instead should place the same imperative on retention for online students as for on-campus first-years. While not addressed in this report, retention is not only critical at the undergraduate level, but is also increasing in importance for graduate programs.

Institutions tend to ask for feedback when it is too late. In our survey of common retention practices, the tool most commonly used to help manage retention was student surveys (82%). Among the institutions conducting student surveys, 83% surveyed exiting students, 71% surveyed first-year or first-term students, and less than 40% surveyed students at any other point in their career, including pre-enrollment. By the time students take an exit survey, there is little the institution can do to influence their decisions or win them back. Instead, institutions should look for opportunities to anticipate attrition sources and take proactive measures to counter loss. First-year surveys are a start, but, again, they fail to account for shifts in student satisfaction beyond the first two terms. In order to understand the factors that will inform students' persistence, institutions should consider conducting surveys on students' enrollment drivers and their pre-enrollment expectations. Conducting annual satisfaction surveys and comparing the results to students' earlier results enables institutions to determine where expectations have not been met and intervene before they make the decision to drop out.

Institutions also gather data through early warning systems. After student surveys, early warning systems were the second most commonly used tool (74%) among survey respondents. These systems gather data to flag students who exhibit a higher risk of attrition based on institutional trends, enabling institutions to intervene and provide support while they can still influence students' persistence. While most responding institutions with early warning systems use home-grown tools (40%), 16% of respondents had an EBI MAP-Works system in place, making it the most commonly used third-party system among survey respondents. No matter which system they have implemented, the fact remains that most surveyed institutions have an early warning system in place, signaling how crucial these systems can be for effective retention management. Trying to approach retention without an early warning system puts your institution behind in terms of catching students while there is still time to have an impact.

Sponsor's Perspective: EBI-MAP Works

The Value of a Holistic Approach to Student Retention

What is the value of data, particularly as it relates to student retention and success? Essentially, we believe that if we collect and analyze particular things about students, then we can more easily determine whether each student is at risk and how best to intervene. But too often, we focus our evaluations of a single item or small subset of items to flag students and develop interventions. Instead, a broader, more holistic approach would have greater value. For instance, a holistic approach to risk prediction would suggest that each data point be taken in context and that a larger variety of data points should be considered.

Think about class attendance, which is often linked with retention. Yet, the impact of missing a single class or even a week of classes can vary depending on the student. The well-prepared, highly motivated student who is performing well will likely return and perform well even after a week of missed classes. On the other hand, a struggling student with low academic motivation may get overwhelmed and withdraw from classes after a week of missed classes.

The potential risk of missing class for each student is easier to evaluate when class attendance is combined with other data and looked at in the bigger context. Basically, students have many factors that can mitigate or exacerbate an issue and ignoring the more complete picture may cause us to intervene with students who do not need it and miss those who do. A similar thing can happen at the institutional level if we focus too narrowly on one kind of data. For instance, one campus we worked with used existing records to identify that first-generation college students had lower retention rates than non-first-generation students. As intervention programs were being drafted, we combined student surveys with the existing demographic and university data. Using the survey data, we found that first-generation students had lower social integration levels than their peers. Further analysis showed that the retention differences between first-generation and non-first generation students could be explained by the differences in social integration. In other words, focusing on students with lower social integration levels rather than first-generation students was actually a more efficient way to identify those most likely to leave.

By combining data sources, we actually did a better job of identifying which students were most at risk and we had an issue (social integration) that became the focus of intervention efforts. Overall, simple flags, single characteristics, or even single behavior triggers are easy to use but may not provide the best value when it comes to understanding risk and intervening to impact retention. Instead, more value is gained when we combine various data and make sense of each in the context of a holistic look at a student.

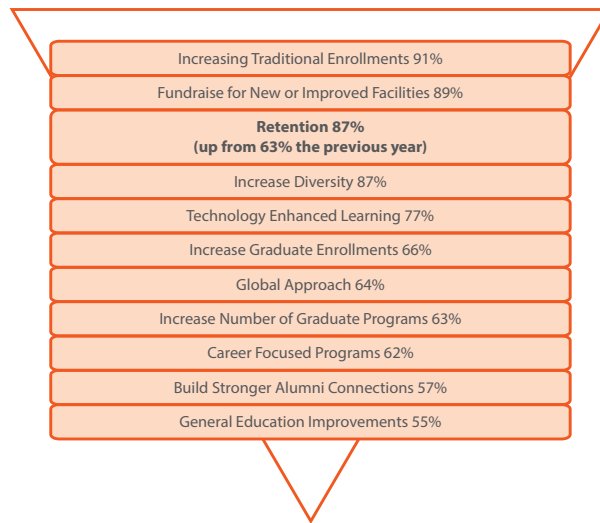
STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING RETENTION

In our analysis of high-performing institutions that have devised and implemented effective retention strategies, a few key trends emerged. First, the directive to prioritize retention came from top-level institutional leaders, who often stayed engaged in the implementation process. This support is crucial, as improving retention can come at the expense of other institutional objectives, especially enrollment targets. Retention's rank in the hierarchy of institutional goals, as well as your student population and recruitment philosophy, will determine whether recruiting for fit is an appropriate strategy for your institution. Either way, data collected during the recruitment process can fuel a proactive approach that identifies students at risk for dropping out and supports proactive intervention. Creatively segmenting student data enables you to pinpoint the student populations most at risk and prioritize tailored interventions that serve these students when allocating resources. In addition to informing retention's place as an institutional goal, a top-down directive to focus on retention can facilitate cross-campus collaboration, which is absolutely essential. A campus culture that promotes student success provides an invaluable asset for improving retention, as partners from across campus can help identify and support students at risk of dropping out.

Retention Strategy Starts at the Top

Retention requires careful planning, collaboration, and cooperation across offices and departments, which calls for a cohesive strategy and a significant investment of time and resources. It makes sense, then, that the directive to focus on retention comes from the top at high-performing institutions. In the cases of the high-performing institutions we identified, the motivation and support to prioritize retention came from the president or from the board of directors. These leaders have the purview to devise campus-wide strategies that align with the broader institutional mission and strategic initiatives. Whether it is tied to policy changes or the increasing financial pressure institutions face due to demographic shifts, top-level leaders are taking increasing notice of retention as an institutional priority. A 2013 Eduventures study found that retention appeared in 87% of 250 examined institutional strategic plans, compared with 63% in the previous year. Not only was it the third most cited priority, but also it was the only priority to mark such a significant year-over-year increase. After devising a strategy that prioritizes retention, institutional leaders must stay engaged with these efforts, if not at an operational level, then at least at a strategic level. At Coker College, for example, the board has identified retention as an area of importance. At Elizabeth City State University, the chancellor reviews weekly reports on the status of students that have been flagged for risk of attrition, including reasons, actions taken, and outcomes. Staying abreast of retention-driven initiatives not only informs senior leaders of the progress made, but also provides them with the context to adjust strategies as needed.

Figure 6. Retention as an Institutional Priority



Source: Eduventures, Inc.

Recruit for Fit

In this age of “big data,” recruiting for fit has taken on new meaning, as institutions are taking a data-driven approach to predicting which students will persist through to completion by identifying institution-specific indicators of success. For this approach to be viable, two things must be true. First, the admissions office must be actively engaged in, if not in charge of, retention initiatives. Second, retention must be prioritized above enrollment goals. Given the overall decline in higher education headcount and increasing competition for enrollments, emphasizing retention may interfere with enrollment goals. Institutions that choose to recruit for fit should examine their data closely and experiment with creative segmentations, as retention indicators will vary among institutions. While many institutions cannot afford to or choose not to recruit for fit, identifying indicators of attrition and gathering data during the recruitment process can feed into a proactive retention strategy that actively engages high-risk students.

Recruiting for fit can improve students’ odds of success and, in turn, boost retention. The concept of recruiting for fit to boost retention is not new. Selective institutions have based acceptance decisions on students’ apparent ability to integrate into campus culture and succeed academically for decades. However, with the data and analytical tools now available, “recruiting for fit” has taken on new meaning. By revisiting admissions data, institutions can detect patterns among successful students, as well as among those who ultimately drop out or transfer. In theory and practice, admitting students who are more likely to persist through to completion minimizes attrition and improves retention.

Two factors determine an institution’s ability to recruit for fit. When determining the feasibility of recruiting for fit, institutions should consider the following two key questions.

- **Who is in charge of retention?** At Dominican University, for example, the admissions office is not involved in retention initiatives; rather, retention is managed by the Associate Dean of Students. Without an awareness of the institution-specific factors that characterize successful and at-risk students, the admissions team cannot admit students based on their likelihood of completion. If recruiting for fit is an institutional priority, then the admissions team must be brought to the table to integrate retention factors into the recruitment process.
- **Which priority is stressed more: enrollment goals or retention?** Even at institutions where enrollment and retention is managed by the same person, the tradeoff between meeting enrollment goals and maintaining retention can be challenging. Coker College, for instance, has recognized that it cannot afford to be as selective while it seeks to grow enrollments. With the overall decline in enrollments, institutions may find that there are not as many students who fit their retention standards as their enrollment goals require. Recruiting for fit, therefore, requires prioritizing retention and sacrificing enrollments, knowing that the forfeited students may well have been lost down the line had they been admitted.

The measures for “fit” differ for each institution and may necessitate difficult decisions. One of our partners that has taken a fit-driven approach to recruiting is a selective private institution on the expensive end of the tuition spectrum. Through creative data cut permutations, this institution determined that students with \$10,000 or more in unmet need were unlikely to return after the first year because they simply could not afford it. Although it meant sacrificing enrollments, institutional leadership made the decision not to admit these otherwise qualified students. The philosophy behind this decision was that enrolling students who could not afford tuition proved a disservice both to the school, which would need to recruit another student, and to the student, who would undergo a difficult transition and leave with extensive debt and no degree. Ultimately, recruiting for fit not only requires knowing which students will be successful at your institution, but also a willingness to deny admission to students who are less likely to succeed.

A proactive approach to retention should begin during recruitment. Some institutions prioritize enrollment goals over retention, while others emphasize inclusivity and access to education. For the latter group of institutions, “recruiting for fit” may mean recruiting students at a greater risk of dropping out – as long as the institution has in place the services to support these students. In these cases, identifying attrition indicators and assessing students’ likelihood to succeed against these metrics are incredibly useful practices to implement during recruitment. Rather than informing admissions decisions, however, these assessments serve to identify and flag the students that will need additional support. The earlier students can find support, the less likely they will be to fall through the cracks. In this sense, institutions can take the guesswork out of retention by identifying which students will need support and providing it as soon as they arrive on campus, if not sooner (see “Deploy Resources to Serve At-Risk Students”).

Sponsor's Perspective: PlattForm

Cultivating Successful Nontraditional Students: Shifting the focus from retention to relationships

By Nancy Coleman, VP of Academic Services – PlattForm

As the former Director of Distance Education at Boston University, Nancy is a results-driven leader focusing on online education, training and development and educational technology.

The Eduventures retention report fills an important gap in our understanding of the growing need to keep students in our institutions. It also raises an alarm about retention in nontraditional, adult student populations, particularly in online learning. It should be clear that retention is critical – for students are our customers, and in a contracting market, we cannot afford to lose them.

The growing importance of online student retention

Due to the organic growth of online learning at many institutions, retention of learners at a distance has not been a priority. In fact, as the report states, many colleges and universities with online programs are ill-equipped to provide retention services to their students. As competition heats up more dramatically in this market, retaining students and helping them succeed in their academic endeavors become critical to an institution's future. Not only are these goals important to students in the moment, but they are vital to the institution's long-term success, as these students will go on to become alumni, brand champions and parents of a new generation of future freshmen.

Focus on the entire student experience

More attention must be paid to the success of online students, and these efforts need to begin with recruitment. Studies show that some distance learners feel disconnected to their

institution. Efforts must be made to *engage* these students throughout their academic programs, and not just in their studies, but in services and virtual activities designed to help support them and enhance their ability to succeed. This means that rigorous programs in student engagement must be designed around the entire student experience, from academics to study support to peer coaching and beyond.

Many of these retention efforts involve the data-driven efforts mentioned in the report, but they also require a personal touch and authentic interaction. Students should hear from the university on a regular basis – and not just around billing, evaluation or student survey events. Communication with the university must be an ongoing activity, one in which students feel that the institution knows who they are and is committed to their success. This cannot fall to the faculty alone. There needs to be an institutional commitment to success initiatives throughout the entire student life cycle.

Where to start

This effort should begin before students embark on their academic journey by making a personal connection to them and aspiring to understand their goals and motivations. Through this process, student risks can be identified and appropriately managed in a proactive approach, rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. If the institution is not prepared to do this, then an outside partner should be engaged to assist.

Only through efforts such as these can institutions focus appropriately on student success, and then perhaps the need to “retain” students will one day be replaced with the desire to help them become more and more successful. Student success, not retention, needs to become ingrained in the institutional culture.

Collect and Analyze Data

The most crucial feature of a proactive retention strategy is the data that fuels it. Often, institutions collect useful data, but not all of the offices that could leverage it have access to it, nor it is always in a format that they can use. Before launching any major retention initiatives, therefore, conduct a data audit to determine what and how information is being collected and to guarantee that it is as impactful as possible. Once a centralized data collection process has been established, data collection should begin early, ideally during recruitment, and continue through regular updates. When analyzing collected data, experiment with different combinations of student characteristics to pinpoint which populations are at the highest risk of dropping out. Retention risk indicators will vary from one institution to the next and may not be immediately obvious. Examining all parts of the campus experience can also surface attrition factors beyond student characteristics.

A data audit can break available information out of silos to apply it most effectively. In advising institutions on how to improve their retention strategies, we often find that they collect useful information, but that it is not distributed to all the offices that could leverage it to foster student success. At one partner institution, for instance, faculty members completed written reports to flag students who did not submit assignments or attend class. These reports were meant to function as an early warning system – before any impact on students’ midterm grades – and often surfaced issues that led to attrition, including sick family members, changes in employment status, and other financial challenges. While a dedicated committee reviewed the reports, they typically focused on providing support through mental health referrals or study assistance; details about students’ financial concerns never arrived at the financial aid office. The key here is not only collecting information early, but also ensuring that those who can put it to use have access to it. The first step, therefore, to devising or revising an institution-wide retention strategy should be a data audit. What data does your institution currently collect? Who has access to it? Which offices could the data be useful to? What format is the data in? This last question is particularly crucial and frequently overlooked. One office may conduct a survey with data that is vitally important for another office, but because the survey was conducted anonymously, it cannot be tied back to the student record. Such small decisions can make the difference between useable and ineffective data. Beyond simply collecting data, the goal should be to collect data consistently and in a way that it is transferrable across the institution.

Collect data early and regularly to identify at-risk students and deploy resources. If you wait until students miss class, fail an exam, or neglect to hand in an assignment before you begin tracking them, you will have missed warning signs along the way. Additionally, data is only as useful as the analysis it enables you to conduct, which requires time and resources. Without knowledge of other warning signals, your reaction to a failed exam or another isolated incident is based on a very limited scope of information. If you know which students are at risk of attrition, however, you can devise a proactive strategy that not only detects issues as they arise, but also supports students before they venture off course. At California State University, San Bernardino, for example, the Institutional Research team has developed a predictive model that classifies students based on their risk of attrition. So far, the model has been highly accurate and has enabled the university to implement special support programs for high-risk students. Whereas most institutions focus their efforts on first-year students, the student intervention

team at Coker College reviews the entire student population once a semester. This system enables the team to continuously monitor students who were not initially flagged as they progress toward graduation. Ideally, these types of systems would begin collecting data during the recruitment process and update regularly so that the appropriate offices would know which students require additional support before they arrive on campus and before major issues arise.

Creative data cuts can help identify high-risk student populations. Geographic factors, student demographics, campus culture, and countless other indicators shape retention trends. It follows, then, that the warning signs for attrition will vary from one institution to the next. Experimenting with different student segments may reveal patterns that could inform smarter retention strategies. Students can be at risk of attrition based on their gender, race, or ethnicity; risk can vary among first-generation college students, transfer students, adult learners, and out-of-state students. Not every institution serves all of these populations. By the same token, many institutions serve students from each of these groups; attempting to support each in a dedicated manner would be an incredibly resource-consuming process. The key, then, is to segment student data to identify the populations that are most at risk and prioritize resources accordingly. Elizabeth City State University, for example, has pinpointed African-American males and “other” freshmen (students who have been on campus for more than two terms but have not completed thirty credits) as high-risk populations. The university has introduced focused measures to keep these students on track, which will be explored in greater depth in “Deploy Resources to Serve At-Risk Students.” Another example of applying creative data cuts to identify high-risk student populations emerged at one of our partner institutions. This school determined that students with \$10,000 or more in unmet need tended to drop out after the first year and implemented a firm admissions policy to curb attrition among these students (see “Recruit for Fit” for more).

Examine all parts of the campus experience to detect students’ pain points. Warning signs for attrition will not always center on the students themselves. California State University, San Bernardino, for instance, has identified which courses have especially high numbers of D grades, failing grades, withdrawals, and incompletes. Knowing that high-risk students often have to take these courses to complete their degree, the university pays supplemental instructors to sit in on these courses’ lectures and hold study sessions immediately after class to ensure that students have absorbed the content. While students in dedicated retention cohort programs are encouraged to attend these sessions, they are marketed and open to all students. With the sessions routinely filling up, the institution has heard demand for more from across campus, not just from the high-risk students. To truly understand drivers of attrition, you must dig beyond the student characteristics to examine all aspects of the campus experience, such as the overall academic experience, policies for financial aid, registration policies, and student life. These factors can impact all students, not only those who have been identified as high-risk for attrition due to their own academic preparation or personal situation, such as finances.

Deploy Resources to Serve At-Risk Populations

Knowing which students are at risk for dropping out enables you to prioritize resources and tailor your retention initiatives to the students who most need support. Given that most institutions serve students from several traditionally high-risk populations, focusing on the students who exhibit the most need at your institution will enable you to maximize your resources while minimizing attrition. Depending on which student populations are at risk, it may make sense to intervene before they even arrive on campus. For example, the California State University system offers remedial education to high school students and professional development for English and math teachers through partnerships with local school districts.

Identify which students are at the highest risk in order to prioritize resources. The first year that Coker College examined student retention indicators, the retention team developed a list of students they were concerned about. By year's end, 85-90% of the students who had dropped out had been on that list. On average, each of these students had four documented conversations with members of the intervention team. On the one hand, the college knew that their system identified the right students. On the other hand, the existing intervention system was insufficient to retain them. For many students, a baseline of support services will be enough to guide them to graduation. Investing in additional retention initiatives, then, is often a question of focusing on the students who most need support, rather than introducing new services across the student population. During the data analysis phase, consider categorizing students based on their level of risk and triage retention efforts accordingly. Introduce initiatives for the students at the highest risk of dropping out before continuing along to each category. Particularly for institutions without robust retention strategies in place, this approach can maximize the impact of limited resources and offer an orderly approach to introducing a more comprehensive retention strategy.

Retention strategies will vary based on which student populations exhibit risk of attrition. Once an institution has determined which student populations are most at risk, they can cater retention programs toward these students' needs. Transfer students need different support than first-generation college students; the focus for low-income students may vary from the focus for minority student populations. At Dominican University, the trend toward transferring to a four-year institution after earning credits at a less expensive two-year institution has introduced a population of students who have not yet adjusted to living away from home. The university has introduced peer advisors, who assist transfer students in the transition to a residential experience. Dedicated orientation sessions can also improve the transfer student experience, as well as the implementation of clear processes in the registrar's office outlining accepted transfer credits and articulation agreements. As an institution serving several high-risk populations, California State University, San Bernardino has created programs for Latino students, first-generation students, low-income students, and students who have graduated from the foster system that serve each population's distinct needs. While there may be some overlap between these groups, having distinct programs demonstrates that the institution is attuned to the factors that impact students within groups and allows the institution to respond accordingly.

Investing in remediation partnerships with local school districts can boost retention down the line. The California State University system has announced a goal of increasing its six-year graduation rate across its twenty-three campuses by 6%, while also closing the achievement gap among underrepresented minority students. The San Bernardino campus has met or is close to meeting both of these goals. In fact, students from underrepresented minority populations graduate from San Bernardino at a higher rate than non-minority students. This success can be attributed, in part, to programs for local high school students and teachers that are taught by campus faculty. In this system-wide initiative, university faculty offer professional development to high school teachers on how to teach math and English more effectively at the high school level. In addition, high school juniors who score poorly on a statewide math and reading exam are enrolled in remedial education programs. Those who are not ready for college by the summer before their first year must take early intervention courses over the summer. While most students come to campus for these courses, the system-wide approach means that students can take the courses on whatever campus is closest, as well as online. For a campus where three quarters of the students require remedial coursework and 70% of students are first-generation, the success of the San Bernardino campus is in large part a testament to the faculty's commitment to serving its students and community, as well as the institution's willingness to invest in students before they have officially enrolled.

Sponsor's Perspective: Tuition Management Systems

At Tuition Management Systems (TMS), we understand that an important piece of a successful strategy for retaining students is helping them afford the cost of tuition through a sustainable financial plan. Since our inception almost 30 years ago, TMS has focused on our mission of helping families afford education and helping schools prosper. With many families facing shrinking incomes and higher day-to-day expenses, finding the money to finance a college education can seem daunting. Helping families manage and plan for tuition expenses with both flexible payment strategies and smart financial planning is critical to the success of your school and the overall retention of your student body.

TMS believes that the development of a long term financial plan for families and students begins early, and is sustained through timely, effective communication. Providing payers with financial guidance at the forefront of the payment process (alongside the acceptance letter and financial aid award), helps families create a budget that meets their financial goals and is able to span the length of the education experience. Affordability counseling – which includes direction on how and when to apply for grants and aid, taking advantage of any ‘free money’ available first, and then offering options to help pay for the gap between aid and tuition – is crucial to avoiding payment panic and the resulting drop in retention.

Communication at important payment milestones, such as within bills and through real-time account billing, improves the likelihood that payers will not only understand their financial commitment to your institution but also have multi-pronged avenues as to how to fulfill that obligation. Offering multiple payment strategies, including one-time payments, payment plans, loans, and a combination strategy using both payment plans and loans to reduce unnecessary borrowing, can be instrumental to getting the bill paid on time.

The last, critical point along the payment continuum to bolster retention is employing a proactive approach to delinquency management. Multi-channel communications provided at relevant stages within the payment cycle should provide clear payment information and direction on how to pay the balance due. These communications may include bills that are concise and contain a direct call to action, balance change notifications to alert payers that new charges have been assessed and balances are due, and past due notifications that include information about late fees. These timely notifications, provided alongside flexible payment programs, education on payment options, and easy to use payment tools supported by customer service educated in affordability counseling, are an important piece of the process in retaining students for the tenure of their education.

To learn more about the products TMS offers in support of a comprehensive retention strategy, please view our website at tuitionmanagementsystems.com.

Devise and Implement a Campus-Wide Approach

Although the directive to prioritize retention should come from the top, its implementation must be a campus-wide effort. Several high-performing institutions attributed at least part of their success to a strong community feeling, whether that can be traced to one person or the entire campus. While that feeling can be difficult to construct or quantify, begin by involving anyone who impacts the student experience, from peers and alumni to faculty and administrators. At the highest level, each group can help foster a culture that celebrates student success. Additionally, participants across campus can take more concrete measures to either identify or support students who are at risk of dropping out.

Bring everyone to the table to develop a cohesive, campus-wide approach. The key to developing a solid retention strategy is promoting campus-wide collaboration that accounts for any cracks that students might fall through. In our retention advising work with one partner institution, one of our first steps was to bring decision-makers from across campus together in one strategic committee. This group included directors from admissions, the registrar's office, financial aid, student services, institutional research, residential life, faculty, counseling services, and all other service or support units on campus. Unlike other committees mentioned above, its purpose was not to review student files or intervene with high-risk students, but to engage in high-level strategic conversations. By bringing everyone to the table, this committee ensured that all campus stakeholders were involved in developing the retention strategy and created a forum to navigate common obstacles, such as fragmented data collection and conflicting institutional objectives. Once such a committee has determined the internal strategy driving an institution's approach to retention, the directors can bring marching orders back to their respective teams. This approach of creating a core committee devoted to retention strategy maximizes institutional efficiency by ensuring that offices across the institution are working toward the same objectives.

Beyond strategy, groups across campus can help identify at-risk students and provide support. Once everyone has been brought to the table, they should be categorized based on their ability to detect issues and provide support. The goal is to devise a system in which everyone on campus plays a role in gathering information, offering solutions, or both. In our conversations with case study institutions, the following emerged as key groups to involve in an institution-wide approach to retention.

- **Include adjunct faculty to ensure students do not slip through the cracks.** As the first-line of contact with students, faculty members can flag performance issues that may signal deeper trouble. While many institutions have processes in place to involve tenured faculty, few include adjunct faculty. This omission presents a host of issues, not least because adjunct faculty tend to teach introductory courses with primarily first-year students. In many cases, adjunct faculty surface issues, but do not know where to deliver the information. Training adjunct faculty on early warning systems not only involves them in the broader institutional retention framework, but also ensures that first-year students, who are more likely to drop out than any other student year, receive the support they need.

- **Regular monitoring in the registrar’s office can flag students who are not on track.** As an office grounded in data about students’ academic progress, the registrar is an absolutely essential function in any retention strategy. At Elizabeth City State University, the office goes beyond standard GPA checks to track a special category of “other” freshmen, those who have been enrolled for at least two terms but have not earned thirty credits. Rather than leave responsibility for progress entirely up to the students, the university takes a proactive approach by offering students support to progress before frustration takes over and they drop out. These types of warning systems provide continuous or regular checks on students’ progress and are relatively easy to implement, as they rely on data that has already been collected.
- **Foster community among peers through cohorts and peer mentors.** Both cohort programs and peer mentoring programs emerged as common practices among profiled high-performing institutions as a means to offer support from within the student community. While cohorts are primarily a means of providing support, peer mentors can flag issues as they arise. Because students often perceive challenges as being unique to their own experience, placing them in a cohort allows them to see that other students struggle with the same aspects of campus life. For example, Dominican University used to mix out-of-state and in-state student housing during a two-day summer orientation, which only served to make the out-of-state students feel more homesick. Since the university began housing out-of-state students together, the students have connected over the shared experience of being away from home. Along these lines, California State University, San Bernardino and Elizabeth City State University both have living-learning communities, in which cohorts of students live together with a peer mentor who teaches the freshman seminar, as well as a faculty mentor. Creating these micro-communities not only groups students who are likely to have similar experiences, but also ensures that they receive the social and academic support they need in a timely manner.
- **Changes in students’ employment or financial aid status can signal risk of attrition.** While the student employment office is often involved in improving affordability for low-income students through work-study programs, it can also provide insight into issues as they emerge. At Dominican University, the student employment office flags students whose employment status changes dramatically, as this has historically been an indicator for attrition. Although this pattern may not apply to every institution, collecting this type of information provides one more data point that can identify students at risk of dropping out. Once they have been flagged, the financial aid office can then follow up to determine whether anything can be done to alleviate the financial burden presented by this shift in employment. At Elizabeth City State University, the financial aid office and development offices have taken a creative approach to providing loans under \$1,100 through the alumni association bridge loan program. These loans are often enough for students to finish out the term and then pay their loan back to the alumni association. The university has raised \$40,000-\$50,000 in bridge loans this year.
- **Residential life and counseling can flag non-academic issues that may lead to attrition.** In addition to supporting cohort and living-learning initiatives, the office of residential life and counseling services can play a vital role in detecting issues as they arise. These offices are often the first to hear about non-academic issues as students adjust to life on campus.

To the extent that residential conflicts, homesickness, changes in outside employment status, or overall emotional health can impact students' enrollment decisions, having a system in place through which these offices can report issues that may impact persistence is essential. Staff in these offices, including peer mentors and residential advisors, should also be familiar with the retention initiatives on campus so that they can direct students to support services as appropriate.

- **Promote a campus-wide culture that celebrates student success and fosters a sense of community.** In several of our conversations, retention managers at high-performing institutions cited the strength of their campus community as a differentiating factor. At Dominican University, one community leader knows every student's name on campus and greets them, fostering a sense of belonging and caring that provides intangible value that may not always emerge in a numbers-driven retention model. The university has grown rapidly over the last fifteen years, however, making it more difficult to learn each student's name; therefore, the priority has shifted to focusing on the students who need attention. California State University, San Bernardino, the largest of the institutions profiled in the case studies, has taken a campus-wide approach to making students feel welcome. Each year, faculty, staff, current students, and alumni welcome 2,300 new students to campus in a community-wide event that most closely resembles an energetic pep rally. Elizabeth City State University faculty members devote Saturday mornings to tutor struggling students. These examples underscore a commitment to student success that cannot be constructed, but is grounded in an institution-wide culture of collaboration and contribution.

NOTES

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- ⁸ Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. 2014. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.
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- ¹² "Benchmarking Admissions Operations." Eduventures. Published April 2014.
- ¹³ Raisman, Neal. "The Power of Retention: More Customer Service in Higher Education." *The Administrator's Bookshelf*. Published 2008.
- ¹⁴ NOTE: Institutions that did not report all variables to IPEDS were not included in our retention ratings. If your institution was not rated, please contact retentionrankings@eduventures.com. We will be happy to plug in your institution's data and provide its rating.
- ¹⁵ "Seizing Opportunity, Navigating Risk." *Eduventures*. Published April 2014.



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