

Recruiting, Retaining, and Graduating College Students

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Retention rates vary among colleges, but their importance does not. Increasingly this measure of accountability is becoming more important to each faculty member and administrator on college campuses. Universities struggle every year to retain students, because student retention is critical to university success. Public colleges receive federal funding based, in part, on retention and graduation rates. If a college struggles to retain students, the graduation rates suffer. Colleges must create techniques and strategies to increase their graduation rates without jeopardizing the rigor and relevance of their courses.

Statement of the Problem

This article will examine how colleges and universities can become better student recruiters, increase student retention numbers, and produce more graduates.

Method of Collecting Data

The data for this report were collected through an extensive literature review and semi-structured interviews with three collegiate administrators/counselors located in Kentucky colleges. These interviews included questions regarding strategies for recruiting, retaining, and graduating students.

Literature Review

The following literature review will examine the secondary data based on the following categories: recruiting, retaining, and graduating college students.

Recruiting Students

Colleges recruit students who have very different backgrounds and skill sets necessitating recruiting strategies to attract very different individuals. Weinstein (2009, p.367) states “In an era of so many challenges, however, developing a recruiting strategy that consistently attracts a steady stream of talented and motivated students is critical.” Colleges must ensure students have a realistic picture of the expectations of the school and engage students to ensure students can meet expectations (Tomkinson, Warner, Renfrew, 2002). Colleges should desire to do a better job screening student interests and talents with each college’s competitive advantage (Heilbronner, Connell, Dobyms, Reis, 2010).

Colleges struggle to differentiate themselves among students. Some students may only look at prestige or cost of an institution. Competition for students is increasing leading schools to generate innovative strategies to attract more students (Fischbach, 2006). One innovative strategy is to view recruiting as customer service. Customer satisfaction is considered key, with attracting and retaining students, as it is with business (Hadfield, 2003). Hadfield says, “How do we focus our recruiting efforts on a target that is so diverse and is always moving and changing?” (2003, p.18).

Hadfield suggests making college feel like a community (2003, p.18). Colleges should cater to their student populations and make everyone feel welcome. Colleges must demonstrate customer service since many students consider themselves clients (Bean, 2005).

Retaining Students

One of the most challenging goals for any college is to increase retention, but it is one of the most important goals. “Student success is predicted by continuity and intensity of the enrollment, along with the content of the curriculum” (Handel, 2009, p.52). Other studies have shown the major predictors of retention are academic entry level and age (Schofield, Dismore, 2010, p.207).

Universities vary in terms of retention rates, and many use benchmarking for comparison purposes. Factors accounting for variations of retention rates include: institutional selectivity, academic preparation, and financial aid (Singell, Waddell, 2010, p.546). Financial aid can be a major factor for many students since meeting financial obligations is troublesome for students from disadvantaged areas and backgrounds (Gordon, Copes, 2010, p.12).

Predicting retention and identifying reasons for student withdrawal is troublesome, since identifying reasons for withdrawal is difficult to pinpoint (Nichols, 2010). Nichols infers many students hide their reasons for withdrawal due to low self-esteem. Many students find themselves too burdened with nowhere to turn (2010, p.101). One key to improving student retention was thought to be improved social integration through enhanced methods of communication (Heaton-Shrestha, May, Burke, 2009 p.83).

Graduating Students

Very little literature exists on improving graduation rates. Most of the literature relates to retention. A sense of involvement and belonging impact student success and

retention (Credle, Dean, Gary, 1991). When students feel a part of something, that drive pushes them to keep going when times get tough; and they are more likely to graduate.

Analysis of Recruiting, Retaining, and Graduating Strategies

The analysis of the administrator interviews will be discussed in three main areas: recruitment techniques and strategies, retention techniques and strategies, and graduation techniques and strategies.

Recruitment Techniques and Strategies

Many colleges are looking overseas for students, because higher education is internationalizing (Healey, 2008). With the ease of social media, some overseas students are increasing their knowledge about U. S. colleges.

Another strategy that tends to work well for small, local colleges is recruiting non-traditional students over the age of 25 with developing careers. Many of these students are able to attend only part-time due to their jobs, families, and financial situations. Part-time enrollment allows these students to attend college when they generally would not be able to do so (Handel, 2009). Many of these students may have previous college experience, are changing careers, or going back to school (Catanzaro, 1999). Lutes (2004, p.39), suggests creating programs dedicated to older learners referred to the school via an outside agency. This program should help with: childcare, job placement, financial aid, and etc. Many larger schools enroll older learners and create clubs for older learners to socialize and create a sense of involvement with the school.

Schools catering to traditional students use their own strategies to personalize the campus. Faculty and administrators want students to know that they will receive a

quality education. Schools want every student to feel special and not like a number, somewhat similar to a business marketing strategy where customers feel special and wanted.

Schools may create a personal feeling by having recruiters, faculty, and staff spend time inside local high schools and/or by taking students to a college to demonstrate what college is truly like. Schools may also take advantage of open houses, orientations, and announcements through high school counselors (Hetzel, Newcomb, Fuller, 2009). Open house is considered a major recruiting tool by California State University, Northridge, whose studies indicate open houses create a positive image for the university and students enjoy the chance to learn about their school (Fishbach, 2006).

Another recruiting technique is word of mouth. The best recruiters are simply faculty, students and alumni, since they know the quality of the education. If current students are happy with their education, they will tell their friends about it as well. Faculty members also play a role in recruiting, because they will relay the quality of the classroom instruction.

Measuring recruitment strategies. The ultimate goal of recruiting for colleges is to get a high number of acceptances into the classroom on the first day. Colleges admit a higher number of students than matriculate to the school. Universities compare themselves against their competition and the national conversion rate of 45%. The bottom line for colleges is to increase enrollment without limits to a particular type of student. Some students will be admitted although they are a poor fit for the school, and colleges

must inspect student qualifications and student interest in the college because most likely these students will not be retained.

Recruiting best students. The best students apply early and apply to many schools. A quick response is important to recruit these students. If a school takes too long to reply, the highly-sought-after students have already decided to go somewhere else. Another technique used to recruit the best students is relaying scholarship qualifications. For many students, financial concerns are a large part of the decision concerning where the student ultimately enrolls. By letting a student know if he/she qualifies for a scholarship early, the school helps the student be aware of the reduced financial burden. Schools should be early and specific when communicating with students. If a school fails to make the student feel wanted and special and is unable to sell how unique the school is, the student tends to go elsewhere. Schools must have a planned communication strategy with high-priority students, since those students have many schools competing for them.

Targeted strategies. Many students including: minorities, students from disadvantaged areas, low socio-economic status, and first-generation students generally require special attention. These students have potential, but lack the guidance to successfully complete or even enroll in college. For many of these students, the family plays a very important role. Colleges may choose to have a specific recruiter for these targeted students. The recruiter should have a similar background to the student and must understand the struggles of the students and their families. Many families do not

understand the financial aid process and the help of a counselor is needed (Gordon, Copes, 2010).

Mentoring can play an important role in helping students in targeted groups. Many forms of mentoring are available including student-student mentoring, and advisor/advisee (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, Simpson, 2010). Mentoring may also take place over social media for some students including Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and Linked In. Online mentoring is especially important in online programs where students do not have direct social interactions with instructors (Barbour, Plough, 2009). These mentoring programs help engage online students.

Faculty, staff, and administrators must understand the needs of disadvantaged students (Credle, Dean, 1991). These students need to feel a sense of belonging to the institution and the success of the school (Credle, Dean, 1991). Credle goes on to outline some steps schools can take for minority students: examine philosophy and mission of school, establish rapport with minority students, and assist in career exploration. Haskins and Kirk-Sanchez (2006, p.20) added study skills assistance, cultural diversity classes, and critical thinking enhancement in order to help minority students.

First-generation students are very intriguing since they are not considered minorities by legal standards, but many schools create targeted strategies for these students.

Preparing students. Pre-college academic preparation is one of the largest hurdles facing colleges today. Many students take a plethora of developmental courses

discouraging them by prolonging their graduation. Many of these students quit school, because they were never properly prepared for college.

Faculty and administrators are frustrated when education forgets about the basics. Curriculums keep expanding while students keep struggling with reading, writing, and arithmetic. These struggles begin at an early age and students mentally drop out of school well before turning 16 (the legal drop-out age in Kentucky).

Helping students adjust. For many students, college life is a major departure from their comfort zone. Students are responsible for their own lives. Many students are unable to handle themselves when they taste a little freedom. Some students are easily distracted by the collegiate lifestyle and forget they are attending college for an education. Some students attend college for one semester for the parties and then leave, but these students are rare. Students from small towns can be intimidated by large schools with more students than their home towns.

Retention Techniques and Strategies

Students cite numerous reasons for withdrawal from college including: family reasons, lack of time, academics were more difficult than thought, financial aid, wrong fit with the school, and et cetera. Some students are not prepared for college and suffered grade inflation in high schools (Moen, Tjelta, 2010). Universities spend massive amounts of money to increase retention, but many are still failing. Some schools tackle retention on an individual basis and recognize a comprehensive strategy is needed (Tomkinson, Warner, and Renfrew, 2002).

Faculty members often know what students are likely to withdraw. An early alert system where faculty report student absences on the first day and dismiss students who fail to attend the first day of class helps students take responsibility for attending class and promotes attendance throughout the semester. Schools must recruit students who are capable of success. If students have to take one remedial class, their chances of retention are decreased by 20%. If students take more than one remedial course, the chances of retention decrease further. Schools must admit students capable of college work and the presence of remedial education dictates the student was not prepared for college to begin with (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, Levey, 2006).

Support services are helpful in retention. Bean (2006) indicates academic audits of student feedback demonstrate the need for support services. Structured academic support services are valuable for retention especially with standardized testing (Gordon, Copes, 2010). Support services are important in retention especially for student-athletes and honors students. These students have personalized rules where they must attend study hall and have their own advising staff. Increasing the number of tutors and creating labs for remedial students to get extra help can create an improvement in retention. Faculty and staff can help retention through identifying students who are struggling and advising them into tutoring or counseling sessions.

Haskins and Kirk-Sanchez (2006, p.20-21) state successful recruitment and retention strategies include: comprehensive orientation and advising programs, mentoring, exam preparation, academic enrichment courses, talking to parent groups, staying in touch with minority students, and assisting in completing admission

applications. Haskins and Kirk-Sanchez also mention the use of instructional technology positively impacting retention for minority students.

Heaton-Shrestha, May, and Burke (2009) indicate the use of virtual learning environments (VLE) to improve retention. Virtual learning environments use information technology for student involvement. A popular version in America is Blackboard, which allows students to communicate with other students through e-mail, groups, blogs, and discussion boards. VLE's enhance communication and social interactions between students, however some studies dispute this suggesting most student e-learning is completed through simpler interaction means such as e-mail (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, and Simpson, 2010). The evidence supporting the previous statement was collected in 2005 and e-learning tools have increased dramatically since then including: Hawkes Learning System, Mymathlab, and Khan Academy.

Identifying students at risk. One risk group for not returning to school is remedial education students who are unprepared for college classes and must take classes to improve skills before completing college credit courses.

Many remedial students are unprepared for regular college classes, because their pre-college academic preparation was poor. Almost all of these students have the ability to learn, but their education was flawed along the way. These students require extra attention and encouragement than regular collegiate students and should be given additional resources. Remedial students must play catch-up in their college career which causes longer delays in graduation, increased student and school expenditures, and decreased motivation.

Delivery methods of remedial education are changing. Many remedial classes no longer use traditional lectures, but incorporate information technology into the strategy. Information technology allows students to learn at their own pace, work from home, and provides immediate assistance to students. This new technology may promote more absences and less accountability for students that need all the extra class time they can receive.

Retaining non-remedial students. Colleges are taking steps to identify students who are at risk for early withdrawal. Faculty members play a large role in student retention. Faculty interact with students every class period and have the best sense of students who are likely to drop out. Faculty may identify at-risk students due to their low grades, habitual absences, and disengagement with professors. Students missing the first class meeting are at risk for early withdrawal.

Colleges mistakenly promote poor retention through their easy withdrawal policies. Some schools have no penalty for students withdrawing from class the week before finals, but others may enforce fees on the student for the dropped classes. The same students enroll every semester and withdraw from class the last week before finals. These policies decrease retention ratings, because of the leniency of the schools.

A study by the University Review Committee at the University of Kentucky (2011, http://kykernel.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/review_report.pdf), reveals undergraduate education should be strengthened and provides recommendations for improving the undergraduate experience to strengthen retention. The recommendations were: expand honors program, increase scholarships, improve residential housing

experience for students, and continue to innovate delivery of classes. Increasing the honors program would lead to more resources for many students and help recruit better students. These better students would perform better and be more likely to stay at the university, because they are receiving the resources and attention they deserve.

Engaging students. Student engagement is a challenge for colleges today. Unengaged students tend to have lower grades, more absences, and poor attitudes toward college.

Instructors can also engage students in the following ways:

1. Directly call on certain students to answer questions;
2. Have students work in teams to communicate with each other;
3. Require presentations for all students;
4. Let students know the professor welcomes questions and wants to answer them.

Graduation Techniques and Strategies

A joint effort between students and institutions must be utilized to increase the graduation rate of students in colleges and universities.

Increasing graduation rates. A very specific formula exists with a national six-year graduation rate between 45-50 percent which only include first-time, full-time freshmen. Four-year rates are lower than six-year rates. To increase these rates, colleges must recruit students capable and willing to graduate. Screening methods must do a better job of selecting quality applicants and admitting those individuals. One step colleges can take is allowing high school seniors to enroll in college classes early. Such a program

allows students to measure their abilities against current college students and provides universities the opportunity to evaluate students. These programs tend to attract better students as long as the requirements for admission are stringent.

Colleges may also use a quality enhancement program (QEP) to enhance graduation rates. The QEP is designed to help students think critically and provide the skills needed to graduate. According to the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost at the University of Texas at Austin (Leslie 2011), the QEP is focused on improving aspects of the educational component that enhances the quality of student learning. It represents a commitment on the part of the institution to identify an area for improvement, to develop a plan to meet specific, measurable goals, and to engage in ongoing assessment of progress toward the completion of the plan.

Identifying successful applicants. Many colleges believe successful graduation applicants are due to student and institutional efforts. Graduation is similar to retention, but is accomplished over a series of years not semesters. One strategy for increasing graduation rates is to create an urgency team to find students who are eligible to return to classes, but failed to register over the summer. The school began contacting these students to determine why they were not returning. Many students indicated they would return to class, but had not registered yet. Other students were not returning because of finances, transferring, and school was not a good fit. The urgency team is a step in the right direction. The school also disenrolled freshmen having all F's at midterm. They were pulled out of their programs and enrolled in associate degree programs until they were able to meet expectations set for them.

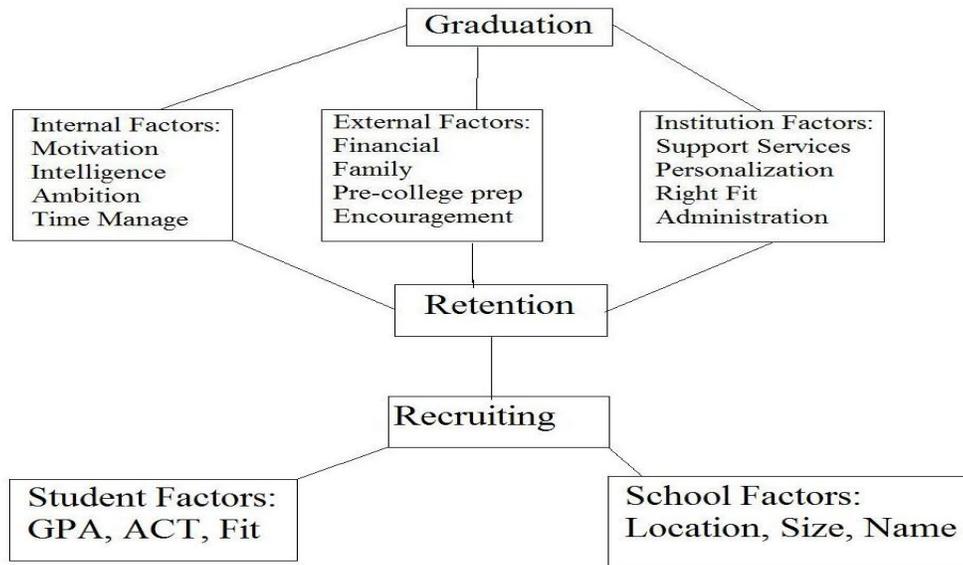
Students who graduate must be driven to succeed and have a high work ethic. Graduating students have something instilled in them and desire a better life. Students who graduate must have a long-term outlook. Students will experience distractions, but must be motivated to overcome these. Motivation comes from within or an external factor such as family, encouraging professor, friends, peer group, and/or school staff.

Increasing students' chances of graduation. Students must attend classes. Many students were not made to attend class in their K-12 education, but were promoted anyway. This created a sense of entitlement to these students who believe college should be as easy as high school. Students should get involved in school. Students must make school a priority and identify with their college and the college experience. Some students fail to realize the importance of school. They fail to read their material and complete assigned work since it does not matter to them. Some students do not even purchase textbooks. Students need time-management skills and some financial counseling. Students must also plan their curriculum with advisors and stay engaged in class and school functions. Faculty should set the bar high and many times students will exceed their own expectations.

Model for Recruiting, Retention, and Graduation

Based on the qualitative interviews and secondary research, a model was developed to graphically depict the data. In the model, retention and graduation both consisted of the same internal, external, and institutional factors. Effective recruiting leads to retention, with the recruiting factors being student and school factors as shown below.

Ross Model of Recruiting, Retention, and Graduation



Recommendations

Given the increased pressures for colleges to recruit and retain students and improve graduation rates, the following recommendations are made for faculty, staff, and administrators:

Recruiting

1. Create a strategy to make recruits feel special.
2. Initiate an alumni group to help recruit students.
3. Encourage students to visit campus before applying.
4. Introduce a liaison in the local high schools.
5. Respond quickly to applications.
6. Increase student awareness about scholarships.

7. Implement targeted strategies for minority, first-generation, and disadvantaged students.

Retention

8. Demonstrate a commitment to diversity through cultural diversity classes.
9. Incorporate mentors for minority, first-generation, and disadvantaged students.
10. Diversify student populations through targeted recruitment strategies.
11. Increase screening efforts to find students capable of success.
12. Disenroll students who fail to attend classes on the first day.
13. Report students in danger of failing classes to their advisors and administrators.
14. Improve developmental education through increased focus, funding, and technology.
15. Use tutoring sessions for all students, especially developmental students.
16. Increase minimum ACT and GPA scores to screen mediocre students.
17. Partner with local high schools to increase academic preparation.
18. Counsel developmental students on their options and provide extra encouragement.
19. Tighten abuse of the financial aid process.
20. Penalize students for dropping classes.
21. Prevent subsequent re-enrollment of students by establishing prerequisites.
22. Create a student committee committed to helping freshmen adjust to college life.

Graduation

23. Use outside speakers to help motivate students.

24. Interview perspective students regarding their motivation.
25. Create programs to help students deal with life issues.
26. Educate students about the financial aid process and their personal finances.
27. Demonstrate a commitment to retention through faculty education programs.
28. Provide students with academic and non-academic opportunities for engagement.
29. Create programs promoting the importance of class attendance.
30. Reward students based on class attendance.

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