

The Retention Puzzle:

Finding the Missing Pieces

By Jennifer M. Tyner

“Retention is an institutional performance indicator.”

When I arrived at work Friday morning, I thought the day would be a breeze. Only four hours until the weekend, when I planned to enjoy two days in the mountains at Lake Arrowhead in southern California.

My calendar was empty, so I planned to hide out in my office and tackle a few unfinished reports.

As I booted up my computer, my assistant poked his head inside the door. “A student is crying out in the hall. I think you need to come out here,” he said.

What now? I wondered. Probably another spring romance had just ended.

I quickly recognized Bethany,* a transfer student from up north, who was bawling outside the advising office.

“Bethany, what in the world is wrong?” I asked.

“I am so fed up with this school,” she squeaked between sobs. I let her catch her breath, then probed deeper to find out what had happened.

* Not her real name.

“Everyone lied to me. When I talked to a counselor about transferring down here, he assured me everything would be fine, and I’d have no problem graduating on schedule,” she explained. “But everything is horribly messed up. I have been to three different offices today just to try and finish registering for classes. My financial aid hasn’t come through. The conference hasn’t transferred my subsidy. And now I find out I can’t qualify for any other aid. Plus, a class I have to take for graduation was just cancelled this quarter. And everyone keeps telling me there is nothing they can do. This is going to set me back a whole year. I am going to pack up and go home today.”

Unfortunately, it wasn’t the first time I had heard a story like Bethany’s. As the co-retention coordinator at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, I have spent many hours talking to students about their enrollment plans. Many of my colleagues at other colleges and academies have shared similar stories. It is clear that Adventist institutions are facing an increasingly competitive environment in attracting and retaining students. We must understand our campuses’

impact on students in order to improve our programs and services, our competitiveness, and most importantly, our enrollment.

What Is Retention?

First, we need to understand what “retention” really is. In elementary and secondary schools, *retention* is the term used to describe a process of not promoting a student to the next educational level. However, in the late 1980s, it became the buzzword in higher education to describe efforts to keep students enrolled at institutions.

According to Randi Levitz and Lee Noel of USA Group Noel-Levitz, “Retention is an institutional performance indicator. It’s a measure of how much student growth and learning takes place. It’s a measure of how valued and respected students feel on your campus. It’s a measure of how effectively your campus delivers what students [and parents] expect, need and want.”¹

It’s not uncommon for institutions to spend several hundred dollars to recruit each new student. Yet, how often do we calculate the dollar value of reducing our dropout rates? According to Vincent Tinto, a private institution that enrolls approximately 310 full-time first-year students would save more than \$200,000 just by reducing the dropout rate by 10 percent. That would be roughly 12 students (based on a 37 percent dropout rate).²

“At Southern, our retention rates have been edging up for the past three years,” says Vinita Sauder, vice-president for marketing and enrollment services at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. “We are now at 71 percent freshman-sophomore retention rate. Our goal is 80 percent within five years. We monitor an effective faculty advisement program, a Center for Learning Success, a freshman orientation program, and a freshman dedication ceremony, and we coordinate a Student Success committee for students who are struggling academically.”

A good retention effort does not need to be expensive. In fact, many believe it represents the best financial investment an institution can make to protect its enrollment. But it can be very hard to know where to start.

In analyzing student retention, the biggest problem is the lack of good information and an understanding of the factors that affect

How often do we calculate the dollar value of reducing our dropout rates?

Picture
Removed

student choices. Often, we know why students enroll at our schools, but we have little information about why they stay or leave, how satisfied they are, and what impact we have on them before they go.

Where to Start

So, where does one start? Just like assembling a jigsaw puzzle with hundreds of pieces, putting together a retention plan can seem a bit daunting.

Fortunately, there is now a large body of research on retention theories and practices. Journals are dedicated to the topic. Thousands of Web pages, chock-full with ideas and resources, have been posted on the Internet. And each year, training conferences are held throughout the world. Here are a few key elements to launching your campus retention plan.

1. **Commitment from the top.** Retention may fall under the enrollment/marketing or student services umbrella, or a teacher may be assigned to come up with a program, but retention cannot be a one-person show. The entire campus must buy into the program. And the chief administrator must champion the efforts. A

proven strategy on many campuses has been for the president/principal to appoint a committee of people from different specialties across the campus to champion retention and to plan strategies.

2. Ensuring the right fit. People incorrectly assume that students drop out mainly because of academic failure. According to Tinto, less than 15 percent of all students' departures result from academic dismissal. In fact, most students leave college voluntarily; often their level of academic performance is adequate and some have grade-point averages that exceed those of persisters.³

Intensive research by Noel-Levitz indicates that most students who leave an institution will do so during the first two years they are enrolled.⁴ The early days of their educational career set the tone for students' success and their desire to stay at your institution. Successful retention efforts must begin before the student even enrolls.

First, determine how well the applicant fits your institution and whether he or she is likely to be successful there. What is the prototypical student at your school? For example, Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, found that its successful students were athletic, social, intellectually average, curious, flexible, worldly, balanced, friendly, and sensitive to others. Most did well in high school. After identifying typical student characteristics, the college sought to admit people who fit the profile, and retention rates rose.

3. Teamwork. By working together, everyone achieves more, especially in the area of retention. Effective plans require a fluid process and shared responsibility. No president or principal can raise retention rates singlehandedly. The entire campus, from physical plant workers to academic deans, must play a role. Dedicated, competent, and caring faculty and staff members are crucial elements in a successful retention program. Involving faculty members in well-structured advising and mentoring programs is essential to student success. Training support staff in customer service and caring will greatly enhance the campus climate.

According to Sauder, "Just as we invest in recruiting and marketing efforts to bring qualified students to our campus [Southern

Adventist University], it is equally as important for our administrative team to create an environment that encourages students to be successful and reach their goal of graduation and entrance into the workforce."

4. A focus on students. Students persist at school when they believe someone cares about them and their success. Caring can be expressed through scholarships, counseling, spiritual guidance, health services, security, tutoring, seamless registration, informative orientation programs, fun activities, attractive dorm rooms, care packages, pastoral support, even tasty cafeteria food. My colleagues and I worked with Bethany to solve her problems with finances and transfer credits. She remained at La Sierra University, graduating with a liberal-studies degree this spring. Showing students you care really makes a difference in their attitude toward your institution.

Convenience also plays a big role because students tend to have more non-academic commitments these days. Institu-

tions often unintentionally erect structural barriers that can detract from students' success. For instance, many campuses I have visited (including my own) force students to deal separately with the bursar, registrar, admissions, and financial-aid offices rather than enabling them to make a single stop. We need to find ways to simplify and enrich the academic experience by providing a more seamless system of registration.

Adult and non-traditional students pose additional retention challenges for colleges and universities. First, these students must make the transition from "citizen in-the-world to student when they enter college." This shift usually produces anxiety, stress, insecurity, and guilt. To retain these students, institutions need to provide special support services to help them manage their full-time adult lives and find time to concentrate on their academic pursuits. These services can include inexpensive housing and transporta-

Suggestions for Assessing Why Students Drop Out

1. Ask them! Conduct exit interviews and ongoing satisfaction surveys. Hold focus groups. Call students and their parents to gather information. Survey students about their opinions on everything from the registration process to food services and teaching practices. The data you collect can help identify institutional strengths as well as areas that need improvement.

2. Don't assume the initial response is the actual reason why a student drops out. Students choose to leave school for four primary reasons: (a) personal, (b) social, (c) academic, and (d) overall dissatisfaction with the institution. Usually, the reason a student gives for leaving a school is not the "true" reason. For example, if a student says he is leaving because he "hates the dorm," the real reason may be that he can't afford the tuition in a private school. When talking with a student, dig for the deeper picture. Get all the facts.

3. Interview faculty. Students often confide in faculty members, alerting them to potential problems they may be experiencing. Since they work with students on a daily basis, faculty members often know what is on their minds. One-on-one student-faculty contact is essential to retention. Not only will these relationships provide information for assessment and evaluation, they will also help bind students to your institution.

4. Review recruiting strategies. Are you currently recruiting the type of student who will succeed at your institution? Does your institution market the correct image to attract students who will appreciate your campus' climate? Can students afford to attend your school? Do you work hard to find creative ways to help students finance their education?

5. Assess the quality of your services. Is your institution committed to quality student services? Is staff trained in current customer service practices? Do they treat students with respect and dignity? Are they gatekeepers or shepherds? In today's marketplace, students have been trained to expect outstanding service. Do you provide it?

6. Review placement and registration practices. Is your registration process seamless? Are students receiving proper course placement? Are remedial classes available? Do students feel confident about the guidance given by advisors?

Research shows that students make up their minds within the first three weeks of classes whether they will stay enrolled at a particular institution. It is imperative for institutions to develop students' loyalty to the institution within the first few weeks. Doing so will not only improve retention rates, but will also enhance the overall campus climate.

tion, childcare, special mentoring and tutoring programs, marital counseling, and health care.

Once a student does enroll, it is important to adequately orient him or her to your campus and institution's culture. Successful integration is essential to securing a student's commitment. Whether it's a two-day intensive or ongoing activities, a carefully planned orientation program will help students make a smooth transition—from elementary school to academy, academy to college, or from work life to school life—and develop loyalty to your institution.

5. **Financial resources.** As private institutions, Adventist schools cost a great deal more than public schools. This may affect both recruitment and retention.

In the "What Works in Student Retention" survey, "inadequate financial resources" were ranked as the fourth most-important characteristic of dropout-prone students.⁶ Particularly for low-income families, financial problems may be central to their decision regarding the enrollment and continuance of their children in Adventist schools.

Adventist institutions are having to find ways to supplement tuition sources. Endowments, scholarships, grants, subsidies, teacher assistantships, and other creative measures are becoming more important to recruiting and retaining students. Plus, it is crucial that people see the perceived value of our education as exceeding its cost in order for us to convince parents and students to invest in it.

6. **Effective evaluation.** Often, we know our retention rates, but not why students leave. In order to increase retention, schools must understand a number of factors relating to the quality of student life, and incorporate these into the design and evaluation of our programs and services. Only then will we be able to establish reasonable goals and to have some influence on student choices.

Here are some questions to get you started:

1. How do relationships with faculty members affect the student experience?
2. Do we need to adapt teaching methods as a result of changing student demographics?
3. How does academic pressure affect

the quality of a student's life and scholastic achievement?

4. What is the impact of residence life, in general, and roommate relations, in particular, on retention?

5. How do our grading practices impact learning and success?

6. What is the campus' spiritual climate? Does our programming really encourage spiritual growth and a sense of being at peace in God's love?

7. How do extracurricular activities contribute to students' experience at our school?

8. What is the impact of diversity on the quality of student life?

9. Do students know how to get the help they need?

10. What systems are in place to obtain student feedback? How is this information used?

As we collect information and develop evaluation practices, however, we must also decide how to define quality—and whose point of view we should take. Should we, for instance, embrace the faculty's or the students' perspective; or focus on the parents' or the church's view? And how, if at all, should we distinguish between quality and satisfaction? These key questions must be addressed if we are to understand and influence our institutional attractiveness and the quality of the experience we provide for students.

So now that you have some ideas to get your creative juices flowing, the next step will be to mobilize your campus for action. Form a retention task force to identify issues and priorities. Encourage your faculty, staff, and administrators to commit themselves to finding ways to retain students. Start dialoging about ideas. Research what others have done. Pull together the pieces and complete the puzzle! ☞

Jennifer M. Tyner is Vice-President for Student Life and the Co-Retention Coordinator at La Sierra University in Riverside, California.

Picture
Removed

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Astin, Alexander W. "Stu-

Students persist at school when they believe someone cares about them and their success.

dent Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education," *Journal of College Student Personnel* 25:4 (July 1984), pp. 297-308.

_____. *Achieving Educational Excellence: A Critical Assessment of Priorities and Practices in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.

Beal, E. and L. Noel. *What Works in Student Retention. The American College Testing Program and the National Center for Education Management Systems*, 1980.

Noel, Lee, Randi Levitz, and Diane Saluri. *Increasing Student Retention: Effective Programs and Practices for Reducing the Dropout Rate*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.

Pascarella, Ernest T. "Student-Faculty Informal Contact and College Outcomes," *Review of Educational Research* 50:4 (Winter 1980), pp. 545-595.

Pascarella, Ernest T. and Patrick T. Terenzini. *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights From 20 Years of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.

Steltenpohl, Elizabeth and Jane Shipton. "Facilitating a Successful Transition to College for Adults," *Journal of Higher Education* 57:6 (November/December 1986), pp. 637-658.

Tierney, William G. *Building Communities of Difference: Higher Education in the 21st Century*. Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey, 1993.

Tinto, Vincent. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

REFERENCES

1. Randi Levitz and Lee Noel, *Tired of Moving Mountains? Getting Retention Results Really Is Easy* (USA Group Noel-Levitz, 1998).

2. Power Strategies for Recruitment and Retention," Workshop presented by Randi Levitz and Lee Noel, USA Group Noel-Levitz, Inc., 1999.

3. Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

4. Levitz and Noel, Workshop, 1999.

5. Elizabeth Steltenpohl and Jane Shipton, "Facilitating a Successful Transition to College for Adults," *Journal of Higher Education* 57:6 (November/December 1986), p. 638.

6. P. E. Beal and L. Noel, *What Works in Student Retention* (Iowa City, Iowa: The American College Testing Program and the National Center for Education Management Systems, 1980).