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Is Retention Really a Top Priority at Our Colleges and Universities?

Summary of Results from the 2010 Leadership Retention Survey

July 2010

Introduction

This report summarizes results from a survey administered to college and university leaders to learn how institutions are currently organized to address the challenge of retaining students to graduation and the attitudes of leadership to retention issues and challenges.¹ Five categories of institutional leaders were invited to participate in the survey. These included:

- 1) President's Office (President, Chancellor, CEO);
- 2) Enrollment/Admissions (Director of Admissions, Vice President of Enrollment Management, Director of Enrollment Management);
- 3) Business Office (Chief Financial Officer, Vice President for Finance & Administration, Business Manager);
- 4) Financial Aid (Director of Financial Aid, Financial Aid Officer or Coordinator); and
- 5) Academic or Student Life (Vice President of Academic Affairs, Vice President of Student Affairs, Dean of Students, Provost).

Maguire Associates' motivation to undertake this research stems from the increasing focus on retention and student satisfaction we have observed at many colleges and universities. It is our hope that this research provides an understanding of the current state of retention at four-year schools and that the research results can serve as a benchmark against which those schools can compare their performance on retention-related metrics.

Key Takeaways

- Institutional leaders generally consider improving student retention and graduation rates to be among the most pressing issues at their institution and believe their institution is genuinely committed to increasing persistence.
- Leaders most often seek to increase retention in order to improve the quality of the student experience, advance their school mission, and increase revenue from all sources.

¹ **Research Methodology:** Over 800 college and university leaders participated in an on-line survey in April, 2010. The results were weighted so that no institution is represented more than once within each leadership group. The geographic representation and general profile of participants' institutions are consistent across the five leadership groups. However, the groups do differ somewhat, most significantly:

- Responding Business Office and Academic/Student Life leaders tend to work at institutions with a needier student population, as indicated by a higher % of Pell-eligible students.
- Responding Presidents and Academic/Student Life leaders represent institutions with lower tuition discount rates than the other three groups.

These differences should be kept in mind when interpreting other results from the research.

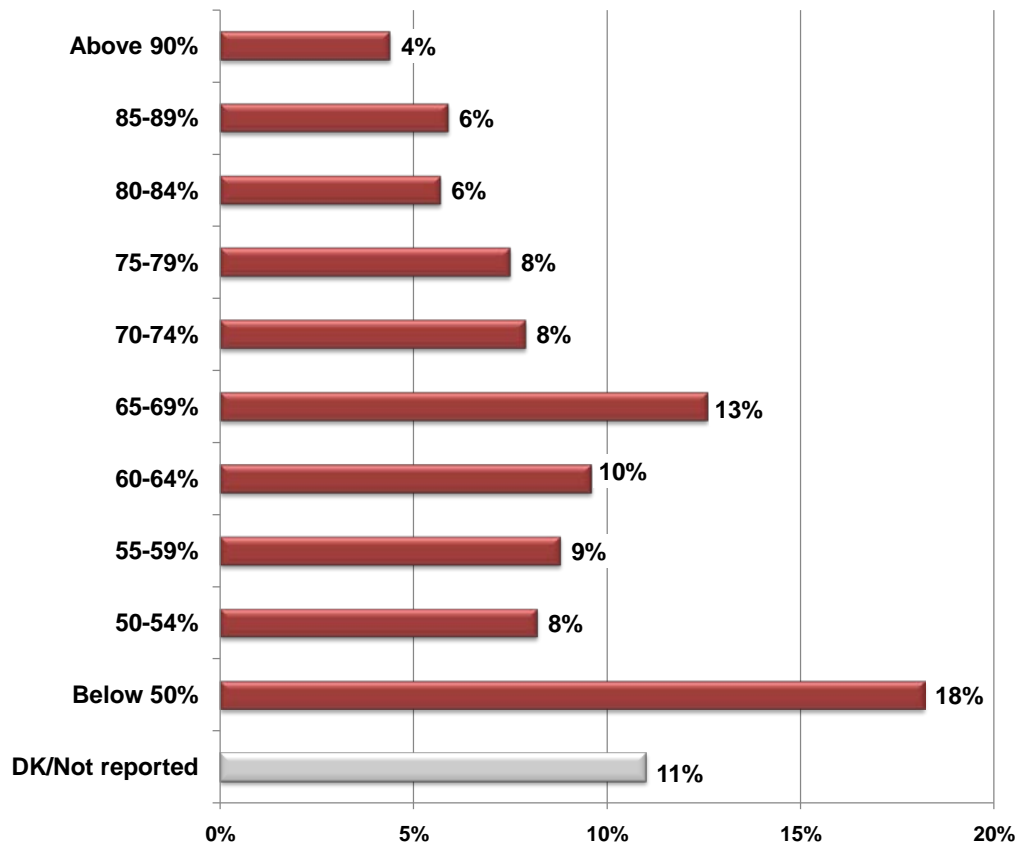
- Despite this general level of commitment to improving persistence, institutions frequently do not have a written retention plan, and monitoring and strategies to improve retention are often entrusted to a committee.
- Moreover, many institutional leaders freely acknowledge that their institutions do not have a strong understanding of the expectations of incoming students or the characteristics and attitudes of dropouts, and few have a robust system in place to track students at risk of attrition.

Comprehensive Results

How Committed Are Schools to Improving Retention?

Along with the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate, the six-year graduation rate is one of the most widely-used retention metrics. The institutional leaders who participated in the study report a wide range of six-year graduation rates for their institutions, as shown in Figure 1. These results are fairly consistent with national figures.

Figure 1. Six-Year Graduation Rates



Also in keeping with national results that have appeared in many published reports, six-year graduation rates were found to be higher among institutions that were private, more selective, more expensive, and where fewer students received Pell Grants.

Sixty percent (60%) of the school leaders report “no significant change” in their graduation rate over the last five years; 36%, an increase; and 4%, a decrease. Public institution leaders were more likely to report an increase. Specifically, half of the leaders at public schools reported an increase, as compared to just 40% at not-religiously-affiliated private institutions and 24% at the religiously-affiliated.

With nearly three quarters of leaders reporting that their retention rate has remained steady, we wondered whether they are at all concerned about retention at their institution. The answer is clearly “Yes.” In fact, the majority of all five institutional leadership groups include “improved student retention and graduation rates” among the three most pressing issues at their institution (Table 1). Not surprisingly, concern over this issue was highest among schools where retention has been known to be lowest: publics, the least selective, the least expensive, and those with many Pell-eligible students.

Beyond retention, the institutional issues identified as most pressing were rather similar across the five leadership groups. A few moderate exceptions are bolded in Table 1.

Table 1. Proportion Including Among Three Most Pressing Issues at Their College/University					
	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
Improved student retention and graduation rates	70%	63%	60%	59%	63%
Meeting enrollment targets (composition and size of freshman class)	49%	64%	50%	57%	51%
Addressing the decline in federal and/or state support	34%	29%	32%	34%	28%
Increasing our endowment	30%	30%	35%	30%	26%
Controlling the discount rate	27%	35%	36%	37%	20%
Curbing the growth of institutional costs	19%	19%	26%	19%	25%
Good record of student outcomes	16%	14%	8%	16%	17%
Quality of educational programs	17%	11%	17%	10%	23%
Good faculty and staff morale	13%	11%	11%	8%	15%
Curbing rising tuition	12%	10%	11%	15%	16%
Improve rankings	4%	5%	4%	7%	5%
Good student behavior	2%	2%	1%	3%	4%

All five groups of leaders feel their institution is genuinely committed to increasing persistence (Table 2). The President’s Office tends to cite the greatest level of commitment. Enrollment managers/admissions officers seem to be more skeptical about their

institution's level of commitment. Responses about commitment did not differ according to the institutional variables, such as institutional control, size, and proportion of Pell-eligible students.

Table 2. Importance of Retention: Mean Agreement with Statements					
	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
My institution is genuinely committed to increasing persistence and graduation rates within the next five years.	4.55	3.72	4.03	3.95	4.16
Retention is a widespread higher education issue whose factors are not unique to my institution.	4.20	3.90	3.75	4.04	4.17
It is more important to allocate additional resources to improve recruiting than to address retention initiatives.	2.16	2.29	2.21	2.27	2.28
More emphasis is placed on retention metrics than is warranted.	1.75	1.76	1.85	2.00	1.89
It would cost too much for my institution to have a significant impact on our retention and graduation rates.	1.74	1.99	1.88	2.16	2.02

Scale: 1 = Very strongly disagree to 5 = Very strongly agree

One piece of evidence that schools on the whole may not be as committed as these leaders indicate comes from the lack of a written retention plan at most institutions. Only 20% - 41% per leadership group report having such a plan.

Why is Retention Valued by Institutional Leaders?

The graduation of successful, satisfied students remains central to the mission of higher education. In this sense, retention is both a moral as well as a strategic imperative. Like other groups surveyed, Enrollment Managers/Admissions leaders recognize the revenue implications of changes in retention rates. This group, however, is less convinced than others that colleagues elsewhere in the institution fully appreciate the connection between more satisfied students and loyal alumni (Table 3).

	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
We can significantly increase our future revenue streams by improving retention and graduation rates.	4.31	4.17	4.43	3.97	4.18
Leadership at my institution fully appreciates the connection between more satisfied students and more engaged, supportive, and loyal alumni.	4.40	3.62	4.13	3.98	4.06

Scale: 1 = Very strongly disagree to 5 = Very strongly agree

When asked to indicate the two primary reasons why their institution would want to increase its retention rate, leaders most often want to improve the quality of the student experience, advance their school mission, and increase revenue from all sources (Table 4). Cited least often (by fewer than 10% of any group) are better faculty recruitment, internal or external mandates, and improved rankings.

Leadership groups differed somewhat in the reasons they put forth. Advancing the school mission was cited most often by Presidents. Increasing revenue was acknowledged as a reason more often by leaders in the Business Office than by other leaders.

Reasons differ somewhat on a number of institutional characteristics:

- Increasing revenue applied more often:
 - to privates (about 50%) than to publics (35%)
 - to smaller schools
 - to less selective schools
- Mandates from outside the institution applied more often:
 - to publics (11%) than to privates (just 1%)
 - to larger schools
- Mandates from the Board of Trustees applied more often:
 - to schools with discount rates above 50%
- Improving ranking applied more often:
 - to more selective schools
 - to schools with fewer than 20% of students Pell-eligible

Table 4. Reasons to Increase Retention Rate					
	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
Improve quality of the student experience	60%	57%	56%	54%	60%
Advance school mission	46%	25%	28%	36%	36%
Increase revenue from all sources	46%	49%	57%	36%	46%
Enhance institutional reputation	19%	31%	33%	37%	27%
Ability to prove good outcome metrics	15%	18%	13%	15%	11%
Mandate from our Board of Trustees	4%	1%	3%	1%	3%
Improve rankings	4%	5%	3%	6%	5%
Mandate from outside the institution (e.g., federal and state policymakers)	1%	5%	4%	9%	3%
Ability to recruit faculty	0%	1%	1%	3%	1%
Do not need to increase retention rate	0%	2%	1%	1%	1%
Other	5%	4%	1%	1%	6%

How Well Are Institutions Organized to Address Retention Issues?

While institutions generally report a high level of commitment, there often is no one person who is responsible for tracking and improving retention (Tables 5 and 6). Student satisfaction and retention is often considered a collective responsibility, entrusted to a “committee” rather than a single administrator or coordinator. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as some research indicates that retention rates hardly differ according to the type of or even the presence of leadership dedicated to this issue.

Table 5. Collective Responsibility: Mean Agreement with Statements					
	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
Student satisfaction and retention is everyone's business at my institution – staff, faculty, administrators, and the entire campus community.	4.49	4.14	4.35	4.25	4.37
It is the responsibility of the faculty to keep students here and graduate them on time.	3.05	2.78	2.69	2.44	2.84

Scale: 1 = Very strongly disagree to 5 = Very strongly agree

	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
FT Administrator/Coordinator	44%	30%	38%	25%	31%
PT Administrator/Coordinator	21%	12%	4%	9%	15%
Committee	46%	52%	54%	47%	54%
No one	8%	21%	15%	22%	14%

How Well Do Schools Understand Why Students Leave?

Most institutions conduct regular research on the subject of student satisfaction and benchmark against other institutions. (Table 7; the exceptions often are those reported by Financial Aid leaders.) However, many schools do not conduct exit interviews with departing students. Granted, this differs sharply by school classification, with leaders at private institutions more likely than those at publics to report that their institution “definitely” conducts exit interviews with each student who leaves to learn his/her reasons for doing so.

	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
My institution conducts annual research to assess undergraduate student satisfaction with academic, extracurricular, support and other issues.	71%	60%	65%	48%	66%
My institution benchmarks our retention and graduation rates (e.g., against other peer colleges’, state and national norms).	68%	67%	65%	42%	71%
We conduct an exit interview with each student who leaves our institution to learn his or her reason(s) for leaving.	45%	33%	40%	32%	38%

Scale: Definitely true, Somewhat true, Not at all true

All in all, most institutions do not have a strong understanding of the characteristics and attitudes of dropouts. It should also be pointed out that the majority of respondents feel that attrition has at least as much to do with school actions and characteristics as it does with student differences in academic or other respects. It is debatable how these two findings might relate to one another (Table 8).

Table 8. Understanding Retention: Mean Agreement with Statements					
	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
My institution has a good understanding of the characteristics and attitudes of students who discontinue their studies here.	3.19	2.86	3.11	2.82	3.17
Retention has much more to do with student characteristics than with institutional factors or influences.	2.80	2.67	2.69	2.80	2.86
The retention rate is indicative of how well admissions does its job recruiting the right students.	2.63	2.53	2.79	2.79	2.77
Retention problems are mostly academic performance issues.	2.42	2.39	2.35	2.43	2.41

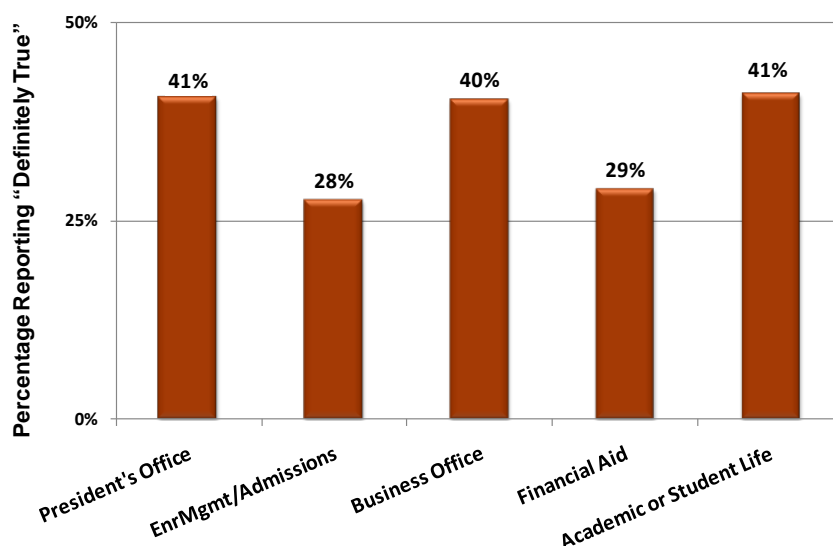
Scale: 1 = Very strongly disagree to 5 = Very strongly agree

Moreover, institutions generally do not seem to have a strong understanding of the needs and expectations of incoming students (Table 9). And, most schools do not have a robust system in place to track students who are at risk of attrition (Figure 2).

Table 9. Promises to Students: Mean Agreement with Statements					
	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
My institution has a good understanding of incoming students' priorities and expectations.	3.63	3.24	3.38	3.29	3.53
My institution fully delivers on the educational experience we promise students during the recruitment process.	3.89	3.63	3.69	3.60	3.82

Scale: 1 = Very strongly disagree to 5 = Very strongly agree

Figure 2. Tracking System in Place: Percent Responding ‘Definitely True’ for Their Institution



How Well Does the Institution Intervene To Prevent Attrition?

Many leaders also feel they are unable to quickly mobilize to intervene on behalf of those identified as at-risk students. More specifically, many feel they lack sufficient resources to support students – academically, personally, and especially financially (Table 10). Not surprisingly, resources are generally seen as more abundant among schools with a more affluent student body. Interestingly, private school leaders reported having more academic and social but not more financial resources to help at-risk students.

	President's Office	EnrMgmt/ Admissions	Business Office	Financial Aid	Academic or Student Life
We are able to quickly mobilize and coordinate the appropriate staff and services needed to intervene on behalf of at-risk students.	3.59	3.27	3.33	3.29	3.65
My institution has sufficient resources to support students who need extra <i>academic</i> help.	3.41	3.35	3.46	3.51	3.42
My institution has sufficient resources to support students who need extra <i>personal/social</i> help.	3.25	3.10	3.21	3.21	3.21
My institution has sufficient resources to support students who need extra <i>financial</i> help.	2.69	2.42	2.64	2.60	2.66

Scale: 1 = Very strongly disagree to 5 = Very strongly agree

What are the Greatest Retention Challenges?

When asked to specify the biggest challenge their institution faces in retaining students through to graduation, a number of themes emerged (representative comments are shown in the sub-bullets):

1. Not enough financial aid/costs too high:
 - *“Financial constraints on students. Many are simply unable to cover the gap between financial aid and cost of attendance.”*
 - *“90% of the student body are on some type of financial aid. Most enroll without the financial resources to persist.”*
2. Demographics of undergraduates
 - *“Many of our students come from first-generation or low income families, and the challenges associated with poverty impede their student success.”*
 - *“74% of our full-time, traditional undergraduates are first-generation students. They have significant financial and cultural issues that impact retention and graduation rates.”*
3. Academic preparation of students
 - *“Some students are not fully prepared for the academic, cultural, and social change they experience moving from high school to college.”*
 - *“The under-prepared population of students that enroll. We are a right-to-try institution with many rigorous programs and we work very hard to assist students reach their academic goals, but they have to really want it.”*
4. Need for student support services
 - *“Increasing student engagement with the overall college experience and working with faculty so that they can better assist students who are either unsure of their career path or who find their original career path is not the choice they will be able to manage.”*
 - *“Making sure that students become connected, engaged, and successful in the pivotal first year, in order to ensure persistence thereafter.”*
5. Need for early intervention with at-risk students
 - *“Having consistent internal systems across the student experience (that is, both within the classroom and beyond) that help assure student engagement, intervention and support to assure retention/graduation success for the students we do say ‘yes’ to.”*
 - *“Providing support for students at risk of leaving due to poor performance or slow progress to degree while also providing challenging learning opportunities for high performing students who may transfer to a more selective institution.”*
6. Students’ personal issues
 - *“Personal issues students encounter which we have little control over.”*
 - *“[...D]emanding work schedules.”*
 - *“[...W]ork and family obligations.”*

Concluding Remarks

We want to thank all of the college and university leaders who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in this survey. Your feedback clearly underscores the challenges that we in higher education face in this area. Indeed, student retention and persistence continue to be complex, multifaceted issues that require a broad-based, collaborative plan for effecting improvement. While most college and university leaders recognize the significance of improving student retention, the results of this survey show that there is much work to be done. We hope this research serves not only as a benchmark against which college and university leaders can compare their performance on retention-related metrics, but also as a call to action. The rewards of a successful program are great -- higher retention will improve the student experience and enhance the institution's reputation and financial viability.

About Maguire Associates

Maguire Associates, based in Concord, Massachusetts, has been a leading provider of higher education consulting and market research for 27 years, having served nearly 400 colleges and universities in that time. Maguire Associates consults with institutions of higher education in assessing enrollment operations, modeling financial aid options, conducting market research and advising on strategic plans.

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