A Multidimensional Approach to Student Retention

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Concern about student retention in higher education has grown dramatically in recent years, as evidenced by the ever-increasing numbers of blog postings, websites, articles, journals, and books on the subject. Indeed, a new survey from Maguire Associates, a research-based consulting firm serving educational institutions and consortia, indicates that most college and university leaders consider improving retention and graduation rates their most pressing challenge.

Most college and university leaders recognize the complex, multifaceted nature of student retention. And yet many of the approaches being recommended to improve retention, while generally useful, tend to emphasize only one or two aspects of the problem—and often the most tactical aspects. Less frequently considered are broader and long-term retention enhancement strategies with ramifications for institutional positioning, messaging, enrollment practices, academic programming and standards, organizational structure, and research capabilities.

It’s time to fill in some of these missing pieces by taking a more holistic view of student retention. Such a comprehensive perspective combines the strategic as well as the tactical, the long term as well as the short term, and notions of attrition mitigation as well as retention enhancement.

We see considerable value in structuring student retention approaches around a multidimensional paradigm that speaks directly to how a college or university can improve those aspects of retention performance that are amenable to institutional action. As displayed in the figure accompanying this article, we have identified eight dimensions of retention positioned opposite one another to form four basic retention strategies.

These four strategies are as follows:

- Improve capacity to address retention issues (Organize-Know)
- Save at-risk students (Track-Intervene)
- Increase student satisfaction (Promise-Deliver)
- Make attrition less problematic (Enroll-Reframe)

Although institutions will vary in their ability and willingness to pursue any particular strategy, all these strategies working together are necessary for a school to be maximally effective in its retention efforts. Below, we discuss each strategy and its constituent dimensions.

Among all the important functions in higher education, student retention is the one that is least often “owned” by anyone.

1) Improve capacity to address retention issues (Organize-Know)

Student retention, even more than most institutional responsibilities, requires that extra attention be paid to organizational capacity to act effectively. That is because among all the important functions in higher education, it is the one that is least often “owned” by anyone.

In part, this is because retention is not a one-time, single-cause event that can be assigned easily to a function or department. It’s an ongoing responsibility of the institution as a whole. Everyone, in other words, is responsible. And that’s typically a way of saying that no one is responsible.

Establishing the most appropriate organizational mechanisms for addressing retention issues thus becomes a critical first step in any comprehensive approach. Such mechanisms can run the gamut from the designation of a specific individual serving as something akin to a chief retention officer to a cross-functional committee to a working group with sufficient authority (and budget) to make a meaningful difference.

Getting staff across multiple functional areas on the same page, literally, by using a common, widely understood set of retention metrics arrayed in compelling “dashboard” reports can be another effective organizational device to provide the necessary awareness, focus, and structural reinforcement and to help make everyone accountable for success.

Just as important as organizing to address retention is knowing why students stay or leave. To put it another way, a school’s capacity to address retention issues includes both the organizational mechanisms to act and the factual knowledge to act upon.

Most schools know how many students enroll, submit deposits, register, and complete their courses of instruction. But schools vary considerably in the clarity of their understanding about why students drop out or transfer to other institutions. Either they don’t ask, or when they do, it is not in a consistent manner or in a way that truly uncovers the more subtle, unstated reasons. After all, dropping out can be a guilt-laden or embarrassing decision; the true reasons for such actions aren’t necessarily easy to elicit. Asking the right
questions and employing sophisticated analytical techniques can supply the actionable knowledge often lacking in even the best organized retention effort.

2) Save at-risk students (Track-Intervene)

This strategy is perhaps the most often cited in the burgeoning retention literature. This is not surprising, as saving at-risk students is all about retaining existing “customers,” and its successful execution has the kind of immediate impact that gets people’s attention. Few would deny the benefits of this strategy, whether they accrue to the student in the form of a college career still on track for successful completion or to the institution in the form of mission fulfillment, enhanced reputation and standing, student and alumni gratitude and support, or financial stability. One might say that any worthy retention effort must have a robust mechanism for tracking at-risk students and intervening to prevent their premature departure.

3) Increase student satisfaction (Promise-Deliver)

Whereas saving at-risk students promises an immediate payoff for all parties, increasing student satisfaction is more often a case of delayed gratification. It can, of course, produce near-term, tactical results (by improving food service or access to parking, for example), but in most cases, this strategy requires a longer lead time to ensure that promises made during the recruitment and enrollment stages are aligned with experiences actually delivered post-enrollment.

An impending decision to drop out or transfer that is driven by negative experience at the school cannot always be reversed through direct intervention with the particular student. By then, it may be too late to do anything. Enhancing student satisfaction by promising only what the school can deliver and delivering well on those promises will likely require a longer time frame.

Pursuing a satisfaction enhancement strategy also helps to ensure that even students who were never at risk for attrition (but who might nevertheless have been dissatisfied with their experience) will graduate satisfied enough to become alumni who are likely to support the school for years to come—not only as donors, but also as volunteers, sources of referral, and advisors or trustees. Retention for its own sake, in other words, is less important than satisfied retention.

4) Make attrition less problematic (Enroll-Reframe)

To this point, we’ve been discussing strategies and tactics aimed at improving a perceived retention (or attrition) “problem.” What about ways of making attrition less of a problem in the first place?

If the institution were to enroll only those students with a high probability of persisting through graduation, that would certainly render most much concern about retention. Mining the school’s historical data to better identify and recruit those students who display characteristics associated with satisfaction and persistence, and adopting financial aid and other enrollment practices to enhance the likelihood of their matriculation, could go a long way toward improving
history or ambitions, current levels of retention and attrition may turn out to be more or less significant. Perhaps the current level is already close to the best level achievable. What if improving retention came at the cost of lowering academic standards? Would doing so be desirable? In this light, a certain amount of attrition might be seen as a good thing. For that matter, is it really a good thing to retain and graduate dissatisfied students who go on to become disgruntled, nonsupporting alumni?

Even if a certain level of attrition is deemed acceptable, there are several mitigation strategies available to offset the negative (largely financial) effects, from an efficient in-bound transfer program that seeks to replenish the ranks of departing students to a proactive dropout contact program that seeks to turn departing students into stop-outs, eventual degree completers, or adult learners down the road. Students who never graduate might nevertheless become ardent institutional supporters if they are maintained as valued members of the school’s employment and advisory network.

Conclusion

“Retention” is a deceptively simple term to describe the often complex relationship between student and school. Only a retention model that encourages institutional leaders to assess their options along multiple dimensions will be sufficiently comprehensive, nuanced, and resilient to work across such an intricate array of possibilities.

This eight-dimension paradigm is such a model. It speaks to the following:

• issues of institutional capacity to understand the attrition drivers within its student body and to counteract them in a coordinated way
• systems for tracking at-risk students and intervening on their behalf
• student satisfaction as affected by the alignment between promises made and experiences delivered
• the strategic significance of attrition as a problem to be solved or a condition to be accepted and mitigated

All these dimensions need to be explored before any school can say it has truly tackled this nebulous yet critically important phenomenon we call retention.

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