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Spotlight on Retention

Students can't graduate if they don't return

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JOON POWELL FOR THE CHRONICLE

Ariel Blackwell (right), a student at Middle Tennessee State, meets with her adviser, Trever Thomas. The university set aside \$3-million to hire 47 new academic advisers, with the goal of doing a better job of engaging students.

SO FAR NOBODY'S PATENTED a Retain-O-Matic, a surefire, off-the-shelf strategy for increasing the number of students who stay enrolled. Until that happens, improving your college's graduation rate will require campuswide planning and commitment, the willingness to rethink approaches to an age-old problem.

Attrition is rampant. Nationally, only 58 percent of all first-time students who started a two- or four-year college in fall 2012 returned to the same institution the following year, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. And 69 percent returned to any U.S. college. That's a ton of missed opportunities—and lost tuition revenue.

Although keeping students on track has always been a challenge, the stakes are getting higher. Demographic shifts are bringing more first-generation students, with

“New-school advising is using predictive analytics to target a specific group.”

many needs, through higher education’s gates. Tight budgets and enrollment shortfalls have stretched many campuses thin. Meanwhile, accountability measures and performance-based funding are intensifying concerns about retention rates, which haven’t budged for decades.

So colleges are adopting more-sophisticated blueprints for student success. Some are embracing big data, using predictive models to identify those who are likely to struggle. Many have beefed

up advising and support services. And various campuses are redesigning key courses

in hopes of getting more students to the finish line.

Trine University, in Indiana, has made customer service a priority. “This is the cell-phone-service generation—if you’re not happy, switch your provider,” says Stuart D. Jones, vice president for enrollment management. “So today it’s all about meeting students’ needs and doing it quickly.”

To that end, Trine’s robust early-alert system allows faculty, staff, and coaches to submit online reports about a student who may need help. Maybe she’s missed two classes in a row, or she’s struggling in math, or her mother’s just been diagnosed with cancer. Each alert goes to a student-success team, which chooses the best person to contact the student, usually within 24 hours.

“We can’t solve all problems, but we don’t want students to suffer in silence,” Mr. Jones says. “That’s why a lot of universities lose students—they just aren’t aware of who’s suffering.”

By the time problems surface, it can be too late. So Trine started a mentoring program last year, based on freshmen’s academic records or financial burdens, for those who are likely to struggle. The university assigns each one to a faculty or staff member, who typically meets with the student once a week for a chat.

Mr. Jones believes the program helped nudge fall-to-spring retention up by two percentage points this year. “There’s nothing wrong with being a little intrusive in a

student’s life,” he says. “They expect it.”

Middle Tennessee State University started its new Quest for Student Success initiative to complement Gov. Bill Haslam’s goal of significantly increasing the number of Tennesseans with college credentials by 2025. The university set aside \$3-million to hire 47 new academic advisers, more than doubling their number. Their charge: to engage students more proactively and efficiently.

“Old-school advising is about who appears in front of you—it’s very limited,” says Richard D. Sluder, vice provost for student success. “New-school advising is using predictive analytics to target a specific group.”

How? Software from the Education Advisory Board, a research, technology, and consulting company, has helped the university identify students who are likely to hit a snag. The system is built on the finding that grades in specific courses, which vary from campus to campus, have great value in predicting who will graduate. (At Middle Tennessee State, for instance, 10 years’ worth of historical data revealed that 78 percent of those who got an A in History 2020 later graduated, compared with just 60 percent of those who got a C.)

Such insights are helping advisers pick out students in the “murky middle,” with grade-point averages between 2.0 and 3.0, whose overall performance had not raised any red flags. The university then runs “campaigns,” selecting groups

TAKEAWAY

Retooling

- Colleges are helping academic advisers become more proactive while doing more to anticipate challenges that students may face, such as providing some first-year students with mentors.
- Instead of concentrating only on students who are most likely to struggle, colleges are mining their data to identify those in the “murky middle,” who might benefit from extra advising.
- Knowing your college’s retention rate is important, but knowing how many students are making progress toward degrees—and why—is essential.

of students and directing them to more-focused advising sessions. Middle Tennessee State has also used the data to guide the redesign of its 10 most-predictive courses.

As of late February, fall-to-spring persistence rates are up 2.2 percentage points over last year for freshmen, 4.5 points for transfers, and 1 point for graduate students. That adds up to 459 students, Mr. Sluder says: “We’re growing enrollment on the back of retention.”

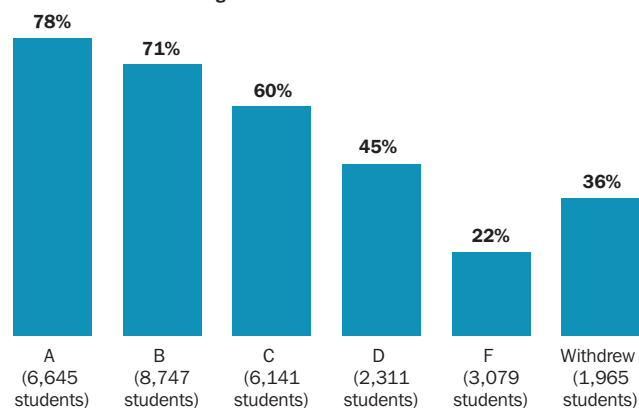
Amid all the discussions of student success, it’s important to remember that a retention rate reveals only so much. DePaul University confronted that fact about 10 years ago after reaching an important conclusion. “A focus on persistence was blinding us to the importance of degree completion,” says David H. Kalsbeek, senior vice president for enrollment management and marketing.

The percentage of students who return for a second year has long been the standard metric by which colleges measure their success. Yet when DePaul officials analyzed their enrollment data, they found that while about four-fifths of incoming students were returning as sophomores the

The Power of Prediction

By analyzing 10 years of data on nearly 29,000 students, Middle Tennessee State University determined the 10 courses that were most predictive of graduation. The findings have helped the university revamp academic advising and redesign key courses. Below are the graduation rates for students by the grade they earned in the most-predictive course, “Survey of United States History II.”

Graduation rate for each grade earned



SOURCE: MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE U.

following fall, only about half were earning at least a 2.5 grade-point average and 48 credits (on a quarter system).

Because students who meet those academic thresholds are much more likely to graduate from DePaul than those who don’t, Mr. Kalsbeek says retention rates were “masking” the main determinant of their long-term success. So the university redefined its goals, emphasizing progress-to-ward-degree as a key metric.

It also revamped its strategies to better serve the needs of all students, not just those most likely to struggle.

In recent years, DePaul has pushed faculty members and advisers to emphasize the importance of first-year performance. The university created a degree-audit system that allows students to track their own progress. It has redesigned gateway courses in accounting, chemistry, and math, and urged faculty

members to give early assignments—and feedback. And it promotes summer sessions as a way to avoid scheduling jams, retake a course, or tackle an especially challenging subject. Its four-year completion rate has increased to nearly 60 percent, up from about 40 percent in 2000.


In short, retention is not the same as progress toward a degree. Also, many students who drop out do so after their second year.

No matter what a college does, its retention and completion rates are unlikely to increase sharply over the short term. After all, research shows that a college’s defining features—its socioeconomic diversity and market position—largely determine a range of student outcomes.

It’s crucial to set a realistic goal for your institution, Mr. Kalsbeek says. Trustees might ask why your completion rate can’t be as high as that of the nearest superselective college, but such a comparison might set unrealistic expectations.

“There’s a fine line,” he says, “between having a vision and hallucinating.” ■

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