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HIGHER ED IMPACT

MONTHLY**DIAGNOSTIC**

March – April 2011

TACKLING THE RETENTION CHALLENGE: DEFINING AND DELIVERING A UNIQUE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

IN THIS ISSUE:

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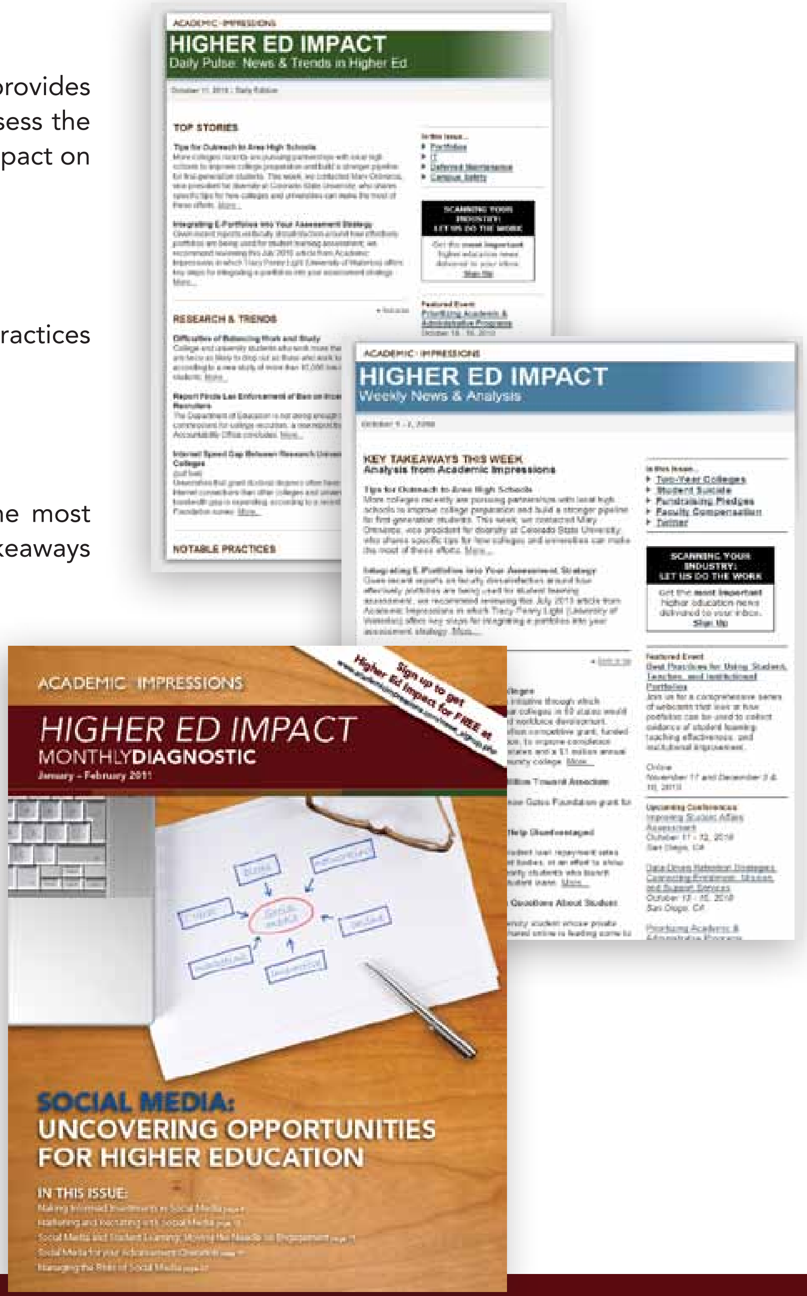

ABOUT ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

We are an organization that exclusively serves higher education professionals. We offer focused and intentionally crafted learning experiences to help you address your most pressing challenges.

Our work addresses a range of issues related to student recruitment and retention, faculty support and development, alumni engagement and development, and increasing organizational productivity.

Learn more at **www.academicimpressions.com.**

A Letter from Amit Mrig
President, Academic Impressions

Large organizations in any industry often suffer from a misalignment of people, policies, and practice. Colleges and universities are no different. And the issue of student retention is a prime example of when good intentions, money, and technology aren't enough to overcome policies, structures, and incentives that work at odds with one another.

Amid the increased public pressure on completion rates, many colleges are pursuing one-off programs whose impact is sometimes difficult to measure. Less focus has been paid to the need for a broader conversation of organizational alignment as a means of tackling the root causes which contribute to student attrition, increased costs, and external demands for accountability.

The first step in promoting student success is to define the specific educational experience and value an institution offers to students – and then align recruitment strategy, organizational structures, student support initiatives, academic policies, and incentives to support that experience and ensure that the institution delivers on its promise.

That's why we've convened a cadre of experts in higher education policy, research, and practice to present an integrated, strategic view of the challenges and opportunities for addressing student success. We hope their insights and advice will be useful to you.

MONTHLY DIAGNOSTIC ONLINE

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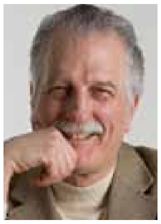
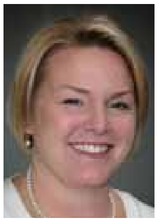
CONTRIBUTORS



Don Hossler, Executive Director, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center; Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Indiana University Bloomington

Don has served as the vice chancellor for enrollment services for Indiana University Bloomington, the associate vice president for enrollment services for the seven campuses of the Indiana University system, the executive associate dean of the School of Education, and the chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. His areas of specialization include college choice, student persistence, student financial aid policy, and enrollment management.

Don has consulted with more than 45 colleges, universities, and related educational organizations including: The College Board, Educational Testing Services, the University of Cincinnati, Inter-American University of Puerto Rico, the Pew Charitable Trust, the University of Missouri, Colorado State University, the University of Alabama, and the General Accounting Office of the United States Government. He has presented more than 130 scholarly papers and invited lectures and is the author or co-author of 12 books and monographs and more than 65 articles and book chapters. Don is currently directing funded projects of The College Board, the Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Spencer Foundation focusing on student success and persistence.



Jennifer Jones, Clinical Assistant Professor, University of Alabama

Jennifer joined the University of Alabama as the director of academic retention in August 2005. In that role, she evaluated student retention data to create, implement, and manage appropriate support programs for first-year students struggling to acclimate to campus life, primarily managing InsideUA, a Web-based retention program designed to engage first-year students in an online community and connect them with campus resources and information. This fall, Jennifer will start teaching in the higher education administration graduate program at UA. Prior to joining the University of Alabama in 2005, Jennifer served as a consultant for Accenture, a global management consulting firm, and garnered significant work experience in residential life and university development through positions at the College of William and Mary, Hamline University, the University of Connecticut, and the University of Eastern Illinois.

Lucie Lapovsky, Principal, Lapovsky Consulting; Past President, Mercy College

Lucie is an economist who consults, writes, and speaks widely on issues related to higher education leadership, governance, finance, strategy, and enrollment management. Much of her recent work has been with boards of trustees on issues of leadership and effectiveness. Lucie previously served as president of Mercy College, a diverse, multi-campus college of 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students with New York City, Westchester, and online campuses. She serves on a number of boards and advisory committees, including the boards of HERS, the American Public University System, Western New England College, Packer Collegiate Institute, the Tuition Exchange, the National Council for Research on Women, and the White House Project. Lucie is the editor of one book and the author of more than 100 chapters and articles.

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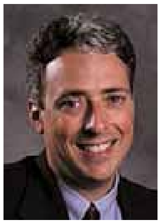
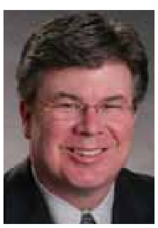


Jon McGee, Vice President for Planning and Public Affairs, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

Jon serves on the cabinet of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, and is responsible for research and analysis in support of enrollment and budget decision-making, strategic planning leadership, and leadership in support of campus visibility and marketing. He has worked in the field of higher education research and policy for 22 years. After earning his Master of Arts degree in 1988 from the University of Minnesota, Jon worked in the state's Department of Finance as a budget analyst, where he was responsible for executive branch planning and development of public sector postsecondary operating and capital budgets. From 1992 to 1999, he was vice president for research and policy development at the Minnesota Private College Council. There Jon was responsible for analysis of state and federal higher education policies, particularly as they related to education financing and student financial aid, as well as collection and analysis of institutional enrollment and financial data. Jon's current research and analysis focuses on demographic trends, the economics of higher education, and the intersection of mission, market, and institutional values.

Kim O'Halloran, Associate Dean, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University

At Montclair State University, Kim oversees enrollment management strategy, assessment of student satisfaction and outcomes, and student advisement and development. She also teaches graduate students in the Department of Counseling and Educational Leadership. Kim's published work focuses on student and academic affairs collaboration, and her current research focuses on student learning, retention, and persistence. She has 15 years of experience as a student affairs administrator, prior to joining the faculty and assuming positions in academic affairs administration. Kim earned her Ph.D. in higher education administration from New York University. She also holds a master's degree in education administration and a bachelor's degree in English from Rutgers University.



Kevin Pollock, President, St. Clair County Community College

Drawing on experience as a high school and junior high school teacher; university admissions, enrollment, and recruitment director; and community college student services vice president, Kevin is an advocate for college access and student service quality initiatives. Under his leadership, St. Clair formed high school partnerships for early college and middle college programs; joined Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national organization that helps community colleges identify strategies to improve student success, close achievement gaps, and increase retention, persistence, and completion rates; and was awarded a five-year TRiO Student Support Services grant from the U.S. Department of Education to help disadvantaged students succeed in higher education. Kevin has presented more than 70 sessions at conferences and colleges and written more than a dozen articles and book chapters on topics such as at-risk students, continuous quality improvement, mentoring, retention, strategic planning, and student success. He holds a doctorate in higher, adult, and lifelong education from Michigan State University.

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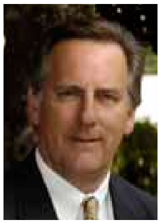
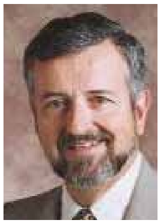


Dennis Pruitt, Vice President for Student Affairs, Vice Provost and Dean of Students, University of South Carolina

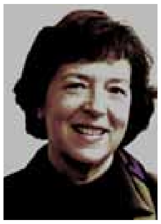
Dennis has led the University of South Carolina's Division of Student Affairs and Academic Support since 1983. He earned his doctorate in education from Carolina, his master's degree in counseling/student personnel services from West Georgia College and his bachelor's degree in history and political science from Armstrong Atlantic State University. Dennis has received numerous national, regional, state, and university awards; he most recently received the Scott Goodnight Award for Outstanding Service as a Dean at the NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education annual meeting. This is his fourth award from NASPA.



Michael Theall, Professor of Education, Youngstown State University

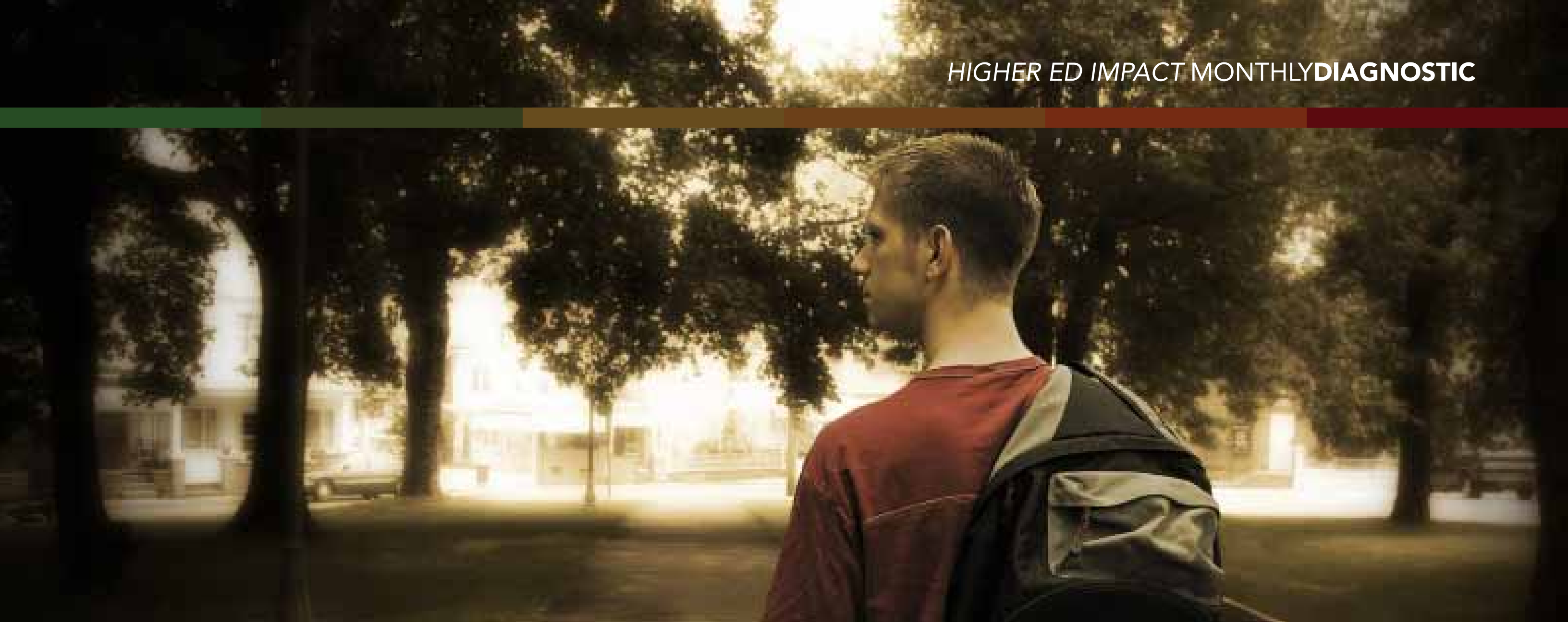
Mike has been a faculty member and/or directed teaching centers at four universities. He has developed, implemented, and managed student ratings systems at two institutions and installed ratings systems at a score of other institutions. Mike's scholarship includes more than 260 books, monographs, papers, presentations, and workshops on college teaching, faculty evaluation and development, student ratings, the professoriate, teaching improvement, and organizational development. He has consulted to scores of institutions in the US and in Canada, the UK, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

His primary research is on faculty evaluation, professional development, organizational development, and student ratings of teaching. He has been chair of the American Educational Research Association's Special Interest Group in Faculty Teaching, Evaluation, and Development (AERA-SIGFTED); a member of the Executive Committee of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (POD); and president of POD.



Jane Wellman, Executive Director of the Delta Cost Project

Jane serves as the executive director of the Delta Cost Project, an independent, nonprofit research and policy organization located in Washington, DC. The Delta Project's mission is to improve transparency about spending in higher education, and to identify and promote practices that enhance cost effectiveness without compromising access or quality. Jane is widely recognized for her work in public policy and higher education, at both the state and federal levels, with particular expertise in state fiscal policy; cost analysis; strategic planning; state and federal regulation of higher education; accountability metrics and performance reporting; and quality control, including accreditation. She also serves as the executive director of the National Association of System Heads (NASH), and as a member of the Board of Directors for the Association of American Colleges and Universities.



WHERE CURRENT RETENTION EFFORTS FALL SHORT

Daniel Fusch, Academic Impressions

This year is seeing increased public and federal pressure on colleges and universities to improve completion rates, raising pressing questions of both policy (Will pressure on completion coinciding with cuts in state funding force public institutions to increase their selectivity and decrease access?) and practice (What efforts will move the needle on degree attainment? Who should lead them? How should they be funded?).

Yet despite the increased attention to the issue, relatively few institutions have adopted a campus-wide and adequately resourced initiative to improve student success and student persistence. Two factors appear to be holding institutions back from seeing significant gains in retention:

- Under-investment in retention efforts, often due to uncertainty over the scope of the initiatives needed and over how best to allocate funds to them; and
- Driven in part by that uncertainty, a reliance on one-off programs (often housed within one department and isolated from other offices)

What's needed now is a rethinking of the costs of attrition (and the return on retention), data-informed decisiveness around investment in student success efforts, and a comprehensive look at how an institution can align its staff, its strategy (such as its admissions and recruiting plans), its programs (such as student support services), and its other resources (space, technology) to improve students' academic performance and persistence.

RETHINKING THE COSTS OF STUDENT ATTRITION

In evaluating the priority of a campus-wide retention initiative and assessing the investment required, it's important to take a comprehensive look at the costs of student attrition. We spoke with Jane Wellman, the executive director of the Delta Cost Project, to learn more about the factors researchers are currently looking into when considering how to assign the cost.

The direct costs of attrition to the institution can include:

- Losses in tuition revenue
- Losses in auxiliary revenues
- Losses in revenue from future alumni philanthropy (a student who doesn't graduate is a lost opportunity to cultivate a future donor)
- The additional cost of recruiting and enrolling the students who will fill the voided places of those who don't persist
- The cost of turning away other applicants in favor of admitting an applicant who then doesn't persist
- Losses in state subsidies that had been directed at students who then don't persist

To that last point, the October 2010 "Finishing the First Lap" report by the American Institutes for Research found that nationally, only 60 percent of students at four-year colleges and universities graduate within six years, and that between 2003 and 2008, students at four-year institutions who did not persist into their second year accounted for:

- $6.2 billion in state appropriations for higher ed institutions
- More than $1.4 billion in state grants to the students
- $1.5 billion in federal grants to the students

The institution also incurs indirect costs, less easy to quantify yet potentially quite weighty. These include the cost to the institution's reputation, diminished public support, and increased calls for accountability.

CALCULATING COST AND RETURN

In December 2009, Jobs for the Future and the Delta Cost Project developed a cost-return calculator that compares the cost of operating various academic programs with the benefits derived from increased student retention. The calculator is based on findings from the report, "Calculating Cost-Return for Investments in Student Success."

MOST COLLEGES ARE UNDER-INVESTED IN ADDRESSING RETENTION ISSUES

Despite widespread concern over student persistence, few institutions have made substantial investments of staff and budgetary resources toward retention efforts.

To learn more about the readiness for addressing retention efforts at colleges and universities, we turned to Don Hossler, professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Indiana University Bloomington and the executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Hossler directs attention to several findings from "How Colleges Organize Themselves to Increase Student Persistence: Four-Year Institutions" (April 2009), a pilot study funded by the College Board and conducted by Indiana University's Project on Academic Success and the University of Southern California Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice. The study found that while 60 percent of institutions do have an official directly accountable for managing, leading, and coordinating efforts to manage student success:

- On average, the amount of time allocated to coordinating retention efforts is equivalent to one-third of a full-time position
- Only 43 percent of the retention coordinators had the authority to create new programs
- Only 25 percent of the retention coordinators had access to discretionary financial resources for use in funding new programs

Reviewing the findings, Hossler remarks, "Who would want to be the vice president of enrollment for an organization at which enrollment was only one-third of your time, and less than a quarter of you had a budget for it? Yet that is analogous to the situation faced by retention coordinators."

The findings also indicate that although a growing number of institutions are collecting early-warning data on at-risk students, most do not design effective intervention systems to make use of the data they are collecting. For example:

- 58 percent of institutions surveyed indicated they had policies in place for reporting midterm grades
- Only 47 percent of institutions reported the practice of flagging courses that have a high DFW (drop/fail/withdraw) rate
- 70 percent of institutions reported that they had minimal or no incentives for full-time faculty to serve as academic advisers

When asked about the barriers to larger investment in retention efforts, Hossler noted a common sense of paralysis that impedes planning. According to Hossler, the factors that paralyze institutions and prevent more effective efforts include:

- The "checklist" problem – when a busy president or provost reviews the most recent monographs, articles, and book chapters that synthesize data on student persistence, in order to arrive at a checklist of practices (good academic advising, student activities that improve engagement, or incentives for faculty to take their students out for coffee); it's too easy to look at that checklist and decide the institution is already doing everything needed
- The resourcing problem – without a rigorous look at your institution's own historical data to determine where you most need to invest effort, the problem of retention can appear enormous and amorphous, making the prospect of adequately allocating resources to a retention coordinator daunting; "When you can't create a unit that has $500,000 to spend," Hossler remarks, "the response is often inaction, but a small, strategically targeted initiative for a large campus may only need $15,000 to just get started"

KNOWING WHERE TO START

To avoid this kind of paralysis, Wellman emphasizes the importance of analyzing the attrition patterns at your own institution – you need to know where attrition is occurring, why it is occurring, and how much it is costing you.

As for why your students are leaving, data from national studies alone is an insufficient guide for knowing what practices to invest in. You need to isolate root causes of attrition at your institution. Wellman advises adopting a suite of exit surveys and interviews. Even anecdotal research may allow you to isolate the most prominent trends at your institution:

- Are more students leaving because of low academic performance?
- Are more students leaving because they aren't getting the courses they need on time?
- Are more students leaving because of financial issues?

For example, if too many students are leaving because their academic performance is too low, start with reviewing your admissions policies or the way you screen students for placement (i.e., is your institution placing too many students who should be in developmental courses in credit-bearing courses?).

If too many students are leaving because they aren't getting into the courses they need and their degree is taking too many years to complete, or because a growing percentage of your students are working full-time and have multiple commitments competing with their education, you may be able to solve some of the issues through flexible course scheduling, blended and online options, and accelerated programs. Such an approach would also require rethinking the availability and flexibility of your academic advising and support services.

In fact, whatever the root causes of attrition at your campus, addressing them will require a campus-wide effort.

NOT JUST A ONE-OFF INITIATIVE

In reviewing the literature and research on retention policies and practices, Academic Impressions has noted that many institutions tend to offer narrowly-focused programming, often centralized and siloed within one function on campus, such as admissions or student services, and often directed at improving rates for specific student populations. These approaches are valid and have a place in the efforts to retain and graduate more students, but a broader conversation of alignment needs to take place.

Driven by their mission, institutions need to define the experience and value they are offering to students. Then, recruitment strategy, organizational structures, student programming, academic policies, and incentives need to be aligned to support that experience and ensure the institution delivers on its promise.

To inform this issue of *Higher Ed Impact: Monthly Diagnostic*, we have spoken with college and university presidents, vice presidents, and thought leaders on retention issues to consider how best to:

- Define your institution's value proposition and unique student experience – see "Starting with Fit: Defining and Delivering the Unique Student Experience" (page 10).
- Align people, processes, and policies to ensure that student experience is delivered both in and out of the classroom – see "Designing the Student Experience: Building Bridges across Student and Academic Affairs" (page 12).
- Examine your academic policies and student support services to ensure that you remove unnecessary obstacles to students' academic performance and momentum toward a degree – see "Delivering on the Promise: Removing Barriers to Student Success" (page 14).
- Ensure that you have an effective early-warning system in place – see "Identifying and Intervening with At-Risk Students" (page 16). ■

STARTING WITH FIT: DEFINING AND DELIVERING THE UNIQUE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Daniel Fusch, Academic Impressions

To what extent is your institution defining what it means to be a student enrolled there? Is your institution's leadership engaged in conversations about what your particular student experience (curricular and co-curricular) looks like, and how the promise of that experience shapes your recruitment strategy? Or how you incentivize your staff to deliver on that promise?

Driven by the mission, your institution needs to be clear about what it stands for and what value its student experience offers. Creating a distinct, cohesive experience that is played out through your institution's academic, residential, co-curricular, service, career, and global experiences is the first step to ensuring alignment of your resources to support student success.

We asked Jon McGee, vice president for planning and public affairs at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, for his tips on achieving this aim.

DEFINING THE PROMISE

> **If you read the typical guidebook, you'd know how much and how many, but you'd also have the sense that Institution X, like every other college of its size and equivalent selectivity in the US, is a friendly and student-focused experience and is committed to educating the whole student. That doesn't actually tell you anything you need to know about the student experience you will have at Institution X.**
>
> Jon McGee, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

In offering that value proposition to students, McGee suggests understanding "value" as consisting of three component parts: *experiential* value, *economic* value, and *emotional* value.

EXPERIENTIAL VALUE

This consists of the types of opportunities your institution is prepared to deliver. It speaks to student questions such as "Can I study abroad?", "Can I major in music?", and "Can I play basketball here?" McGee warns that institutions often overvalue the experiential component and allow it to drive their brand messaging, paying insufficient attention to other ways of defining the educational experience.

ECONOMIC VALUE

"At its crudest," McGee suggests, "this involves two questions: *Is it worth the cost?* and *What is the economic return on enrolling here?* Colleges need to do a better job at the front end of conveying the outcomes of the educational experience they offer." These outcomes can include:

- Salaries of graduates
- Percentage of graduates employed in their career of choice
- Percentage of graduates who went on to graduate school, and what degrees they attain
- Percentage of graduates who do volunteer service after completing their degree
- The benefits and opportunities that alumni attribute to their educational experience at your institution

The key is to craft a compelling story around the outcomes of your institution's student experience. Your alumni are perhaps best positioned to help you define and communicate that story. In reunion surveys, ask your alumni about specific ways that your institution prepared them for their career or graduate studies. Ask about their relationships with faculty. Ask about the type of perspective they developed during their undergraduate years.

EMOTIONAL VALUE

Offering an example of a first-encounter-with-the-campus experience that he believes is quite common, McGee describes a parent driving a student 200 miles to participate in a campus tour. The student sees the campus and says, "Oh, I don't want to go here," to which the parent replies, "Get out of the car, we're going through that tour."

"It's a purely emotional response," McGee notes. "It might have been sparked by anything – the demographics of the students walking by, the quality of the food, the curb value of the campus facilities. Outside of the admissions office, colleges systematically undervalue the role emotional value plays in college choice. The parent may be asking: Is my child going to be more than a number? Is my student going to be safe here? The student may be asking: Can I relate to people on campus? Will I have friends here?"

Be intentional in the emotional value you promise as a part of the student experience, and be prepared to deliver on it. For example:

- If you promise timely and personal responsiveness, then this needs to be a component in the training for your advisers, your faculty, your support services staff, and even your maintenance staff.
- If you promise entry into a global community, that brand promise needs to drive decisions on curriculum, organizational structure, what initiatives are resourced with priority (In budgetary terms, is study abroad a campus priority or an afterthought?), and even housing (How are your international students integrated with the larger campus community?)

NOT JUST FOR SMALL, PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

Don Hossler, the executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, emphasizes that you can define unique student experiences even if you are not a small, selective, residential institution. While a large public, for example, may not be able to define or deliver one cohesive experience applicable to its entire student body, the institution can mine its data to identify student cohorts and define several distinct student experiences driven by its mission.

UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR STUDENTS SEE THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

McGee suggests this exercise to assist in evaluating how well-defined your student experience is, and how well an entering class is shaped to thrive in that experience:

- Ask first-year students to pick from among 21 adjectives to describe the institution
- Ask first-year students to pick from among 21 adjectives to describe themselves

For example, in one recent exercise, the four adjectives students selected most frequently to describe the institution were: *fun, friendly, comfortable,* and *community.* The four adjectives students selected most frequently to describe themselves were: *fun, friendly, cooperative,* and *driven.* "It's a good match," McGee remarks. "If you are who you eat, you are who you enroll. Your students become a part of the brand you project. They come here because they are like we are, and by virtue of coming here, they make us more like who they are."

Understanding what your students value in the educational experience you already offer can help you make the right investments to ensure you deliver on that value. If first-year students feel that "community" is a major part of your promise and they regard themselves as "cooperative," you might prioritize investments in community-building and community-enriching co-curricular experiences, collaborative learning experiences, interdisciplinary activities, service learning, residential learning communities, etc.

"Survey throughout the four years," McGee advises. "Find out if you are delivering." For example, check to see if your graduating seniors assign the same adjectives to the student experience that your first-year students did. This can provide a good check on whether you've delivered the student experience you promised.

RETHINKING ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

"You can't separate retention from what happens prior to admission," warns McGee. "Retention starts with fit."

Eighty percent of entering students surveyed at Saint John's indicate that this institution was their first choice (well above the national average), and about 90 percent of the first-year students persist into their second year. McGee attributes the high retention rate to the institution's success in defining the unique value it offers students and driving its recruitment strategy accordingly.

This entails:

- Bringing in the right students and communicating with them very clearly about your brand promise and the outcomes they can expect
- Knowing the expectations of your incoming students
- Understanding how they see your brand promise

As you define the characteristics and outcomes of the particular student experience you offer, you will be better equipped to seek applications from students who will thrive at your institution. ■

DESIGNING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS STUDENT AND ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Daniel Fusch, Academic Impressions

If your institution opts not to "be all things to all people," but to offer a specific, defined student experience that it is uniquely positioned to design and deliver (a single experience for a private liberal arts college; a cluster of linked, cohort-based experiences for a regional public university), the next step is to consider how you will align the various academic, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities your campus has to offer in support of that experience – and how you will align academic and student support services to ensure student success.

Kim O'Halloran, associate dean for the college of education and human services at Montclair State University, offers a few scenarios to illustrate.

SCENARIO A

Institution A provides a unique residential experience marked by a seamless learning experience in and out of the classroom. The experience this institution has designed might include residential colleges, living-learning communities, classrooms located in the residence halls, student leaders and club involvement in first-year experience courses, and/or faculty in residence.

SCENARIO B

Institution B emphasizes preparing students for service and active leadership in their communities. The institution invests resources in service learning, civic engagement, and internship programs, and brings in adjunct instructors or guest speakers from major nonprofit organizations and corporations to offer "real world" perspectives.

Each of these scenarios requires alignment and collaboration across different functions on campus; integrating the academic experience into all areas of campus life (residential life, student activities, community service, internships, etc.) requires building bridges between student and academic affairs. It requires shared responsibilities across departmental silos for defining the student experience offered, designing the programs and services that bring that experience to life, and for implementation and assessment.

PARTNERING ACROSS CAMPUS

Common institutional policies and practices often serve to keep student affairs and academic affairs siloed and separate. O'Halloran summarizes the most common barriers to meaningful partnership:

- Competition for limited resources
- Limited sharing of information as a means of protecting a unit's resources
- Evaluation and rewards systems that do not incentivize working together (for example, faculty evaluation systems that prioritize research and under-emphasize service to the institution, or even leave service largely undefined, may make it more difficult for faculty to engage in collaborative, cross-campus initiatives)
- Differing ways of measuring "student success" and a lack of understanding about the other unit's goals

O'Halloran suggests that to be most successful in moving the needle on student persistence and academic performance, units across student and academic affairs need to arrive at a common understanding of the educational experience that your institution promises, and the role each group has in reinforcing and implementing that experience.

A combined research initiative or mining of the institution's own data can be an initial step to bring faculty and student affairs professionals together to examine how best to design and deliver the educational experience.

Conducting assessment as a partnership between student and academic affairs to identify the factors that contribute to and impede student persistence is a terrific way to start. This takes advantage of faculty research expertise and student affairs' expertise regarding the student experience at the institution.

Kim O'Halloran, Montclair State U

Such an effort helps both divisions see that they are striving toward one goal, and helps them construct a shared knowledge base. It should be agreed upon from the beginning that the results of the assessment will be used to develop and/or revise programs, support services, and structures that will support those factors that lead to student success and minimize those that serve as barriers.

Once you have the data, O'Halloran recommends undergoing shared strategic planning exercises to acquire a shared language and build a shared plan for moving forward:

- Define "student success" for your institution
- Define goals for improving student success
- Examine together how each division can contribute to those goals

It's critical that the meeting be designed to help participants understand how each group conceives of its role. ■

DELIVERING ON THE PROMISE: REMOVING BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Daniel Fusch, Academic Impressions

In a recent interview with Academic Impressions, Dennis Pruitt, vice president for student affairs at the University of South Carolina, suggested that one of the most critical factors in ensuring student success is ensuring momentum toward the degree:

> **Historically, many have assumed that if students get over their homesickness, if they have a good affinity group, if they feel good on campus, they'll persist. But the two factors that truly help students persist are academic progress toward a degree (having a goal and gaining momentum toward it) and maintaining maximum eligibility for the maximum amount of financial aid (to ensure non-interruption in their courses).**
>
> Dennis Pruitt, U of South Carolina

This suggests that more than anything else, supporting student success is about empowering students to build momentum toward their goals, and removing barriers to their momentum. To learn more, we turned to Kevin Pollock, the president of St. Clair County Community College, and Don Hossler, professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Indiana University Bloomington and the executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

REMOVING ROAD BUMPS: DO YOUR POLICIES AND PROCESSES GET IN THE WAY OF STUDENT SUCCESS?

Your institution may still face a higher-than-necessary attrition rate if your academic policies and procedures offer too many "road bumps" that delay or impede your students' progress.

Or, as Kevin Pollock remarks in a pointed reminder, "Any time your students have to walk across campus unnecessarily from one office to another in trying to resolve an issue is an opportunity for them to walk to their car and leave."

Here are a few examples of policies and procedures worth reviewing:

- **Grade recalculation** – does your institution average the two grades when a student retakes a course, or do you keep the first grade on the transcript (so that it remains a part of the academic record) but use only the second grade in calculating cumulative GPA (incentivizing and rewarding improved academic performance)?
- **Adding a major or minor** – how many steps does this process take, and are they outlined clearly for the student?
- **Course scheduling** – review the schedule from a student's point of view, and avoid scheduling bloopers that delay students' momentum (Pollock cites one case in which three non-sequential prerequisite courses were required, and all three were offered on the same evening, making it impossible for the students to take more than one of the prerequisites that term)
- **Financial aid** – how clearly are changes in the process communicated to students? Do students have access to their aid before they need to buy textbooks and other materials?

How do you identify the stumbling blocks at your own institution?

Pollock suggests that a key task of your student success task force or retention committee is walking through each step of the student's experience on your campus, from admission on, to take an in-depth look at where students run into bottlenecks or delays in service, or where there might be missed opportunities to better support their academic success. Pollock recommends trying an array of data collection methods from surveys to focus groups to "mystery shopper" exercises (in which a member of the task force walks through a process in person to get a first-hand perspective of its efficiency).

"How does a student register for classes?" Pollock remarks. "Is the process productive or not, and if not, how can you fix it? When is financial aid released, and how do students get their information? What about your bookstore – are all the items there on time, and have students received their financial aid in time to buy them before classes start?" Often, Pollock suggests, walking through the processes and procedures of the student experience will reveal where a policy or a process proves a hindrance, rather than a help, to students.

BUILDING THAT MOMENTUM: ACADEMIC ADVISING

It's likely that academic advising will be near the top of your student success task force's checklist of areas to audit and review. If your advisers are faculty, then advising is an opportunity to intensify faculty-student interaction (one of NSSE's key benchmarks), and in any case, early and ongoing advising can help your students set goals and develop a curricular road map to achieve their goals.

Few things will slow a student's momentum toward a degree and obstruct your institution's ability to deliver on a promised academic experience as much as inefficient or inaccurate advising will. At many institutions, there are significant barriers to providing students with high-quality advising. For example:

- Students may be assigned an adviser too late – perhaps several semesters in
- Faculty advisers may not be up-to-date on changes to the course catalog, or their knowledge of requirements might be restricted to their discipline
- Faculty advisers may not have training in advisement
- Faculty may be evaluated and rewarded in ways that do not incentivize advising (or it may be low on a list of priorities in an already overburdened faculty workload), or they may be evaluated by the number of students they advise rather than by the quality of the advising or by having met specified outcomes

According to a study funded by the College Board, "How Colleges Organize Themselves to Increase Student Persistence: Four-Year Institutions" (April 2009), 70 percent of four-year institutions offer minimal or no incentives for full-time faculty to serve as academic advisers.

Interviewing Lucie Lapovsky, president of Lapovsky Consulting and past president of Mercy College; Dennis Pruitt, vice president for student affairs at the University of South Carolina; and Mike Theall, an associate professor at Youngstown State University and a leading thinker on faculty evaluation, we identified three approaches to consider as you look to improve advising at your institution:

- Adopt a **differentiated staffing model** for managing faculty involvement in advising; for example, on a rolling basis, assign faculty to a short-term, increased advising load in return for a reduced teaching load, and ensure that the performance criteria for faculty evaluation are adjusted to incentivize rather than penalize involvement
- Hire **full-time advisers** (non-faculty) who are trained in academic advising and can take on a heavier advising load
- **Empower students** to take more ownership over their own advisement, by structuring advising to aid them in developing individualized learning paths (an adviser can assist a student not only in thinking through the courses needed to achieve degree and career goals, but also in making intentional choices about the co-curricular and extracurricular activities that will support their goal) – and by offering students the ability to conduct a degree audit online to monitor their own progress

FROM IDEAS TO ACTION: FORMING THE STUDENT SUCCESS TASK FORCE

To take your efforts to the next level, you need a student success task force or retention committee that:

- Includes the right people, including representation from enrollment management, student affairs, faculty, the business office, and academic advising
- Has access to discretionary funding, for piloting key initiatives
- Has clearly defined strategies for mining institutional data and seeking student input (whether through regular surveys, focus groups, or an open forum)
- Sets manageable, measurable goals

Student success is everybody's job – it's the reason you work at the institution. The task force needs to include representatives from all the major functions on campus that interact regularly with students.

Kevin Pollock, St. Clair County Community College

It is especially important, Don Hossler suggests, that your retention coordinator or committee chair be intentionally selected. "It's important to identify a well-respected, knowledgeable insider," Hossler notes. "And if this position comes with limited access to financial resources, then you need an individual who has the organizational and political savvy to navigate the campus landscape."

An alternative approach to heading up any type of institutional planning task force – suggested by Pat Sanaghan, president of the Sanaghan Group, in his book *Collaborative Strategic Planning in Higher Education* (NACUBO, 2009) – would be to identify co-chairs in a move to foster further collaboration between the academic and administrative sides of the institution. (To learn more about Sanaghan's approach, which is designed for an institution-wide strategic planning effort but includes many points that are adaptable to a smaller task force, read our article "Planning and Budgeting in a Low-Trust Environment.")

Finally, to build momentum and ensure that plans actually get implemented, Pollock recommends identifying specific, actionable steps that can be measured and evaluated along the way:

- Identify top concerns of the student body
- Complete focus groups on a certain issue
- Identify three processes to update based on focus groups

"You can change processes and policies and pilot new efforts, in small pieces, along the way," Pollock notes. "Little changes add up." ■

IDENTIFYING AND INTERVENING WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Daniel Fusch, Academic Impressions

Even with a clearly defined student experience; close alignment of people, practice, and policy; and a concentrated effort to remove barriers to a student's momentum in pursuing educational goals, some students will remain unlikely to persist. With a well-coordinated early warning system, an institution can intervene and provide or refer the necessary support to ensure more students stay enrolled and ultimately graduate.

IDENTIFYING AT-RISK STUDENTS: WHAT DATA ARE YOU LOOKING AT?

The earlier an academically at-risk student is identified, the better the prognosis for their success in college. Early alert systems, implemented within the first four to eight weeks of a term, can be instrumental in beginning an intervention that can help facilitate students' success and increase retention.

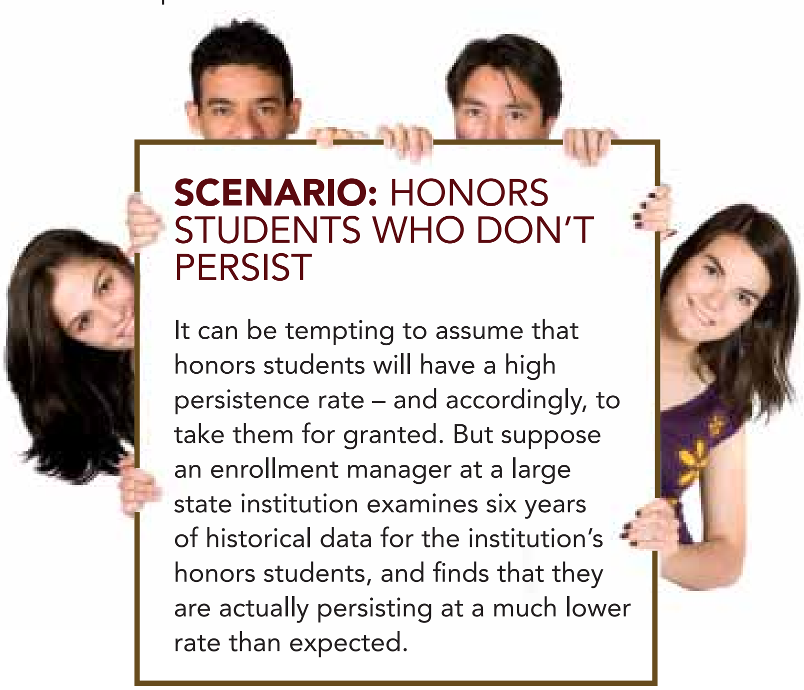
However, faced with frequent studies offering multitudinous data on factors influencing student attrition, it can be challenging to sort through the information available to determine what indicators deserve most attention, both to proactively identify students who may be at risk at a point prior to enrollment, and to drive early alert systems in the first weeks of a semester. To learn more, we interviewed Jennifer Jones, a clinical assistant professor and recently director of academic retention at the University of Alabama. Jones has developed a comprehensive and strategic approach to identifying and intervening with at-risk students, and offers her advice for:

- Making good use of your institution's own historical data to predict risk factors
- Clarifying what real-time data matters
- Taking more than a one-shot approach to intervention

PREDICTIVE HISTORICAL DATA

The past decade has yielded abundant studies citing factors that can contribute to the likelihood of student attrition. Cohorts often deemed at risk in the published research include the academically under-prepared, students who have taken a gap year between high school and college, students who work full-time, students who are enrolled only part-time, financially independent students who must bear the full cost of their education, students with family obligations, minority populations, first-generation students, etc. Before the semester even begins, it can be good to prepare for tracking students who occupy more than one of these cohorts. Many adult, nontraditional learners, for instance, will have a multitude of these contributing "at-risk" factors – work, family, and financial obligations may all be competing priorities that exert pressure on their ability to complete a degree.

However, Jones cautions that just looking to national trends is not enough. "Don't take the national data as gospel. Too often, we forget to look at our own data," Jones warns. The national trends may offer pointers as to what indicators to check for – but then you still have to check for them. To key in on the most critical indicators of student attrition for your institution, Jones recommends relying more on your institution's historical data to help you identify the specific cohorts at your institution that may be at risk. Be wary of your own (and others') assumptions, and review four to eight years of institutional data on the persistence rates of student cohorts that you expect might perform low in terms of persistence – and also of student cohorts you expect might perform high. Because of demographics unique to your institution, you may find surprises.



SCENARIO: HONORS STUDENTS WHO DON'T PERSIST

It can be tempting to assume that honors students will have a high persistence rate – and accordingly, to take them for granted. But suppose an enrollment manager at a large state institution examines six years of historical data for the institution's honors students, and finds that they are actually persisting at a much lower rate than expected.

Why would students who are academically advanced be less likely to persist?

Further analysis reveals that a large percentage of the honors students were recruited from out of state. Despite an exemplary academic record, these students lived at a further degree of separation from family and from their support networks. There are other factors at play, as well. Despite an excellent high school GPA (which looks good on paper), some of the students lack study skills, and have been finding the transition from high school to college more difficult than they expected – while still other honors students have been finding their first-year college classes insufficiently challenging.

The lesson to be drawn, Jones suggests, is that you need to identify your own institution's at-risk cohorts. Use the national data to help direct you as to where to start looking, but challenge your assumptions and place the greatest reliance on your own historical data.

DFW ASSESSMENT

Beyond examining particular student cohorts, Jones recommends looking at historical data for particular courses. A few institutions have seen great strides in their ability to predict and identify at-risk students by means of DFW assessment. In this case, the point is to identify which first-year courses show the highest drop, fail, and withdrawal rates. Your historical data can empower you to predict which first-year students are likely to face the most difficulty – based on which courses they are registering for.

For example, if you know in advance that your math courses have a high DFW rate, you can move proactively to support the students enrolled in them with supplemental instruction, tutoring, and other interventions. You can encourage faculty to integrate supplemental instruction or math labs into the syllabus and the course. "You can offer the students opportunities to achieve greater success," Jones remarks, "before they even have the chance to fail."

REAL-TIME DATA: WHAT'S MOST CRITICAL

Finally, you can generate alerts that trigger particular interventions for at-risk students based on data provided in real time during the term. Examples can include:

- Invite faculty to alert you to warning signs within the early weeks (e.g., missed attendances, signs of depression, etc.)
- Identify the weeks in the term that have the highest withdrawal rates, and reach out to students who withdraw
- Design alerts based on midterm grade reports (does a student have one C-? Two? Three? You can set up tiers of different priorities of alerts)

PLANNING FOR INTERVENTION

Once you know you can identify the students who are most at risk academically at your institution, the question is how to reach out to them and refer them to someone who can help them. Jones suggests:

- "Residence halls are your best shot if you are a residential campus," Jones remarks; based on midterm grade reports, identify the dorms where you can make the greatest difference, and coordinate with the residential staff to plan for outreach to at-risk students.
- At a commuter campus, determine the best way to reach a particular at-risk demographic, and send regular updates (whether by email, a Facebook page, or alerts to a mobile phone)
- For a large campus, establish a student call center

THE CALL CENTER

At the University of South Carolina's call center, freshmen get called twice by peer mentors during the year. "Supply cell phones with 1,000 free minutes," Jones suggests, "and have your peer mentors call to find out how at-risk students are doing. Students are more likely to respond to other students in a casual conversation."

Other interventions that can make a difference include:

- Outreach to students who are on academic warning after their first term
- Asking the registrar for names of students who have not registered by the last day of registration, and reaching out to them – "this process may help students commit to returning, and may also identify what students are at risk of not returning"

Most of all, Jones suggests, it's important to be strategic in your timing and understand the points on your academic calendar when students are most in need of support. "It's not about just looking at your data," Jones remarks, "or having one good early alert system in place. You need to look at the entire cycle from the student's perspective."

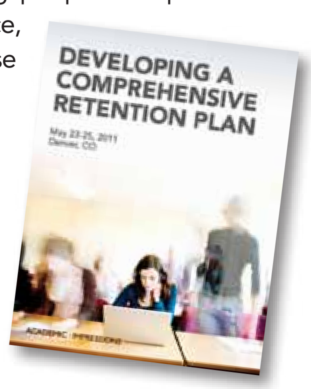
It's not enough to introduce our support services and other resources to students at orientation or in the syllabus; it's not relevant to them then. They don't know they need these resources, so they disregard them. Watch your own academic calendar. At what points do you see more withdrawals? When do your students realize they are in trouble? That's when you need to put out alerts through email and through the faculty in your classes. Put the messages out when those messages are most relevant for the students.

Jennifer Jones, U of Alabama ■

DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE RETENTION PLAN

In this issue of *Higher Ed Impact: Monthly Diagnostic,* we have drawn from some of higher education's leading experts on student success to offer insight into what a comprehensive approach to retention looks like – from defining the educational experience students will succeed in, to letting that definition drive recruitment strategy, to aligning people and policies with that promised student experience, to identifying and intervening with those students who are most at risk.

Take the next step by joining us in Denver, CO on May 23-25, 2011, hear from top experts, and begin building a campus-wide and comprehensive approach to improve retention outcomes.



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