MANAGING THE WHOLE STUDENT LIFE CYCLE

A HANDBOOK FOR HIGHER ED

PAUL MARTHERS

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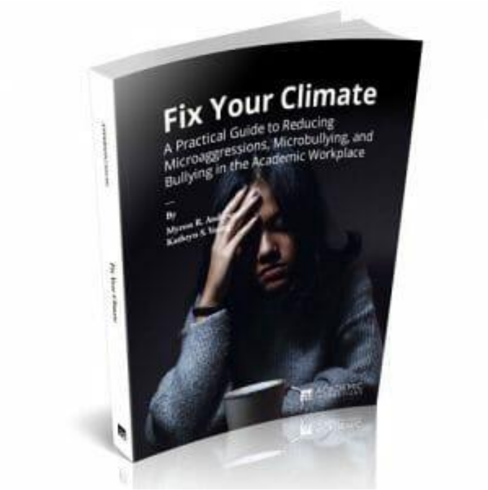

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FOREWORD

Why It Is Essential to Manage the *Full* Student Life Cycle

In this era of declining high school graduate populations, competition between colleges to enroll students is fiercer than ever. One result of this is the escalating cost to recruit, yield, and enroll a student. Data-informed enrollment management offices routinely calculate the return on the investment (ROI) they make in recruitment and yield activities. Gauging ROI requires tracking metrics such as cost per applicant, cost per enrollee, and net tuition revenue—both on the institutional level and in comparison to national benchmarks for such performance data. College presidents and trustees often ask ROI questions about such metrics. Thus, it is helpful for enrollment managers to know, for example, that the median cost to recruit a student ranges from nearly twenty-five hundred dollars for private colleges to just over five hundred dollars for public colleges, according to research published annually by the enrollment management consulting firm Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

But while it is common for institutions to chart their recruiting return on investment (ROI), it is not a widespread practice for colleges to calculate the cost of attrition. For many enrollment offices, managing retention is seen as "someone else's problem," because most student departures occur after the handoff of the freshman and transfer classes by the admission and financial aid offices to other offices, such as undergraduate education and student affairs. This widespread disengagement with retention issues by enrollment management offices is not surprising, given that for most of them, the primary charge is to focus on student input. Managing the subsequent segments of the student life cycle—from new student orientation and the first-year experience through graduation—is thus the responsibility of other administrative divisions, such as student affairs, student success, or undergraduate studies.

Yet in a higher-education climate where enrollment scarcity, not abundance, is more often the norm, strategic institutions are those that consider both student input and student throughput. Astute institutional leaders know that the goal is not just to admit, yield, and enroll, but also to create conditions and programs that support student success from matriculation to graduation. For strategic enrollment and student affairs offices, there are at least two key ROI metrics beyond the traditional student input measures: retention and graduation rates. Student success-oriented institutions therefore track whether the students they have admitted and enrolled persist to graduation. When the students admitted leak out of the pipeline from orientation to graduation, strategic institutions investigate the reasons for this and come up with interventions or programs to reduce attrition and increase graduation rates.

Student leakage out of the completion pipeline is a huge problem. Higher-education researchers such as Neal A. Raisman suggest that the average college loses 30 to 48 percent of its total enrollment each year. To some, those numbers may sound like they are too high, but quick scans of IPEDS data for most non-top-forty public universities, liberal arts colleges, or comprehensive universities will show modal first-year retention rates below 80% and six-year graduation rates below 60%.

Data-driven enrollment management and student success offices know to go beyond calculating the cost of enrolling new students to add in the cost of replacing students who do not persist to graduation. When attrition occurs, colleges can only maintain their current enrollment by increasing the size of each new incoming class proportionate to the percentage of students who do not make it to graduation. For example, if a college of 2,000 undergraduates loses half of its enrolled freshmen on the route to graduation day, that college will need to enroll considerably more than a steady-state 500-student first-year class. To replace the expected attrition of students, the college in this example must enroll the usual 500 new students plus 50% more. In other words, this college, just to maintain its enrollment at 2,000 students, will have to act like a college of 3,000 that needs 750 new students each year.

This is not an efficient enrollment model. And it is arguably not a sustainable business model either. Operating in such a way will take a toll on finances and admissions selectivity, even if the college is able to enroll 750 students each year. Consider the effect on the college's selectivity and incoming student quality—if the college normally yields 25 percent of the students it admits, getting those extra 250 students to enroll will require making admission offers to 1,000 more students.

Suppose this college is already admitting 3,000 of its 4,000 annual applicants. Needing to admit 1,000 additional applicants, without significant growth in the applicant pool, might be the difference between moderate and zero selectivity for many colleges that resemble the one in our example here.

Another potential factor to consider is the revenue lost when students leave before graduation. One simple way to calculate the cost of attrition is to multiply the college's student population by the attrition rate and then multiply that result by the annual cost of attendance (tuition plus room and board). Strategic enrollment management and student success offices, however, know not to stop with that calculation. Why? Because the cost of enrolling those additional 250 students may increase marginally due to the need to offer higher tuition discounts to reach enrollment targets. Why might the college need to offer higher tuition discounts? Perhaps due to perceptions that getting a degree there is not valuable or prestigious and thus not worth paying the price of full tuition. Perhaps due to concerns that something negative is occurring at that college if so many students (50 percent) leave before graduating. Finally, perhaps the higher tuition discounts are necessary in order to maintain incoming student quality as admission applications decline—like running faster just to hold your position in the pack.

High attrition costs colleges in other ways beyond threats to selectivity, yield, tuition discount rates, and net tuition revenue. Some of the costs are less obvious and thus often ignored. High attrition rates, for example, can affect college rankings, especially the subjective variables influenced by perceptions of whether the college in question is ascending or descending. Reputation rankings are an example of such a subjective variable. High attrition rates might decrease a college's ranking when ratings scales use objective quantitative variables as proxies for institutional quality. In such cases, the institutions that retain and graduate their students at the highest rates will sit atop the rankings. Some influential college rankings take the extra step of calculating the difference between expected and actual graduation rates. Under this approach, when the projected retention and graduation rates (based on incoming student credentials) fall below the actual rates, the institution loses ground; when actual rates are higher than projected rates, the institution sees a rankings boost. Rankings approaches such as this are increasingly common and penalize institutions whose retention and graduation rates are falling.

Rankings such as *U.S. News & World Report* (*USNWR*) rely on reputational assessments and projected graduation rates. For example, in determining its 2021 college rankings, *USNWR* weighted three combined factors (retention rates, graduation rates, and graduation rate performance) at nearly one-third (30 percent) in its formula. Expert opinions on the academic reputations of colleges accounts for another 20 percent in the USNWR rankings. Thus, it does not require a leap of logic to surmise that colleges that fail to graduate at least 75 percent of the students they enroll will fare poorly in the *USNWR* rankings. Even colleges that dispute the validity of *USNWR* rankings as biased toward the wealthiest institutions cannot completely get by with that assertion, no matter how persuasive—especially if their attrition rates are rising and their graduation rates are falling.

High attrition and low graduation rates can have other negative effects. Bond-rating agencies such as Moody's and Standard & Poor's factor data on admit rates, yield rates and graduation rates into their assessments of an institution's financial health. To decision makers in the world of finance, those enrollment and student success metrics comprise student demand and institutional stability indicators. When declines in those key student demand and institutional stability indicators reduce an institution's bond rating, the college will end up paying a higher interest rate on any new debt it incurs. For example, if a college decides to issue bonds to finance the construction of a new science facility, perhaps paying the former interest rate to the bondholders would have added $1 million extra to the cost of the building. Yet now, due to higher attrition, rising tuition discounts, and declining net tuition revenue, the college is considered a riskier investment and is thus charged a higher interest rate that adds an extra $1.5 million to the cost of the new science center. This type of spiral, where the cost of doing business keeps rising incrementally as student demand and institutional stability indicators decline, can be especially painful for colleges with low endowments and a high reliance on tuition revenue. For these reasons, paying close attention to retention and graduation rates—in addition to the usual enrollment input metrics—is imperative for ensuring the financial health of a college.

The examples cited here demonstrate that as enrollment goals and results diverge, retention and graduation rates become even more important for an institution. Managing the student life cycle—from recruitment through commencement—

benefits institutions through higher retention, graduation, and student satisfaction rates. It also benefits students, because the changes to services and policies that drive these higher rates generally improve the overall student experience, which in turn frequently translates into higher student demand on the front end and higher alumni giving rates to the institution on the back end.

Beyond rankings, high attrition can be damaging in other ways. Every student who departs is one more person who is likely to have less-than-complimentary things to say about the college. Negative stories about the experience or the atmosphere at a particular college, when broadcast by a large number of students leaving earlier than planned, will undoubtedly lead to a "word on the street" problem, which can quickly become an institutional reputation problem, and reputation problems can easily magnify into enrollment, retention, and revenue challenges. When a college's reputation becomes unfavorable, fewer students apply to that college, fewer of those admitted accept the offer, and fewer of those enrolling will so do without a tuition discount. In such cases, what starts as high attrition is just a first step that can lead to a slippery slope of institutional decline, one that if not reversed can threaten the entire college's viability.

When students and parents visit colleges that have low retention and graduation rates, staff at those colleges should be prepared to be asked (and frequently!) why so many students leave. Those visiting students will worry that the friends they make during freshman orientation will be unlikely to be around even for the second year. Those visiting parents will wonder why so many students do not see the value in remaining at the college and will become especially skeptical about this educational value issue if the college has a high price tag. Admission officers representing such colleges will often find themselves on the defensive in response to these questions about the retention and graduation rates—not to mention the conclusions parents may be drawing about the institution's value proposition. Coming up with effective ways to answer those questions will require a strategy. Still, no strategy works better than improved results. Thus, it would be far better for those colleges to devise strategies and implement initiatives to avoid getting into the quandary of needing to defend low retention and graduation rates in the first place.

In the ROI tradeoff calculations they make, institutional leaders must therefore factor in the costs of attrition—not just those costs that are quantifiable in lost tuition dollars and inefficient use of enrollment management and student affairs budgets, but also those costs that are tougher to measure yet which still take a toll on an institution's reputation, perceived attractiveness, and ultimately its bottom line.

That is why it is key to widen one's lens to see the work of enrollment management as encompassing both student input and student throughput. Institutional leaders must consider the full student life cycle: from the admissions prospect phase through graduation. Achieving more successful student throughput (higher retention and graduation rates) takes the pressure off colleges to increase student input through larger incoming classes. Consequently, institutions that are strategic about opportunities to maximize the full student life cycle (from recruitment through graduation) and that build ROI measures into both the input and the throughput phases of that life cycle will be more likely to thrive during challenging times. Those institutions that strengthen their intake—though consistent and steady achievement of enrollment goals—and their throughput, by raising retention, graduation, and student satisfaction rates—will be the ones that position themselves for long-term success.

For these reasons, continuing to view the work of enrollment managers as just about the intake work of recruiting new first-year and transfer students means missing opportunities to leverage the full student life cycle in ways that benefit both students and institutions alike. No longer can institutions afford to regard enrollment management and student affairs offices as specialized, disconnected units that, at worst, simply hand off to each other—or, at best, that complement each other but with too low a return. No, the work of student success, as this book will argue, requires that all student-facing offices, regardless of whether they appear on the organizational charts of enrollment, student affairs, or academic affairs, must adjust their lenses on the work they do to see it not at the institutional level but at the student level. Focusing on the student level means working in an intertwined and collaborative way to advance the student experience. By taking a student-facing approach and working to elevate the student experience, institutions will find that it is easier to fulfill their missions and achieve their aspirations.

This book intends to serve its readers as a resource guide for higher-education professionals interested in learning more about the concept of managing the full student life cycle—from matriculation to graduation—in order to improve student success. As the examples cited in this book will show, there are many and varied strategies for boosting success rates for undergraduate students (as measured by increased retention, degree completion, and student satisfaction). My own experience working in enrollment and student affairs has predominantly focused on undergraduates at four-year institutions. Because that institutional territory is what I know best, this is where I have concentrated in selecting most of the examples presented here, and the featured strategies and examples that appear throughout the book are representative of innovative or best practices, or both. That said, if only one thing is certain about how institutional leaders can best approach managing the student life cycle to advance student success, it is this: Strategies and initiatives are most effective when they fit institutional missions, and student profiles and characteristics.

A Roadmap for This Book

Readers can either read this book through from start to finish, or they can peruse those chapters they consider most pertinent to their work and their interests. To help you navigate the book, following is a brief rundown of the chapters.

The first chapter of this book (*Improving Student Success Requires Cross-Campus Collaboration*) discusses the importance of the organizational structures managing and monitoring the student experience and the value of cross-campus collaborations to break down specialized siloes.

Chapter 2 (*Onboarding, Orientation, and the First Year of College*) describes effective approaches to new student onboarding and orientation and makes the case that this is where retention begins.

Chapter 3 (*The Role of Faculty on the Front Lines of Student Success*) examines ways to engage faculty directly in efforts to enhance the student experience.

Chapter 4 (*Establishing Equity in Student Success Programs*) considers ways for institutions to ensure that they are providing all students access to the full student experience.

In Chapter 5 (*Keeping Students on Track from Matriculation to Graduation*), the focus is on reasons why institutions should take a life cycle approach to removing roadblocks to student success.

Chapter 6 (*Student Pathways: Getting to an Articulated, Integrated, and Unifying Undergraduate Experience*), discusses the critical need for institutions to clarify and highlight the key purpose-defining guideposts from matriculation to graduation.

Chapter 7 (*Removing Policy and Procedural Barriers to Student Completion*) focuses on offices and functions that undergird the management of the student life cycle.

Chapter 8 (*Helping Students Develop Grit and Resilience throughout the Student Life Cycle*) provides a discussion of innovative approaches based on research findings on student achievement.

Chapter 9 (*Utilizing Data and Metrics in Student Success*) makes the case for a culture of evidence and data-informed decision making in managing the student life cycle.

Chapter 10 (*How Enhancing the Student Life Cycle and Advancing Student Success Often Means Managing Change*) raises and examines a reality that often accompanies efforts to advance student success: change management.

The eleventh and final chapter (*Lessons for Moving Forward*) attempts to pull it all together and provide guidance for institutions ready to address student success comprehensively.

I hope that you will learn as much from reading this book as I did in researching and writing it.