

3

Three retention and enrollment management experts, with more than twenty years' experience working in more than 620 institutions, share their most effective innovations and best practices that have achieved cost-effective results.

Strategic Moves for Retention Success

Randi S. Levitz, Lee Noel, Beth J. Richter

A revolution appears to be sweeping the campuses of the nation's colleges and universities, and it is based on a simple credo: *The success of an institution and the success of its students are inseparable.* Institutions that take this credo seriously commit the institution—and every individual in it, from the president to faculty members to support staff—to a path of radical and permanent change.

One reason to begin this journey is that many institutions that have already done so have experienced enormous success. A more compelling reason is that institutions that do not may not thrive. There are times when doing nothing is the most dangerous course, and these may well be such times. As budgets tighten, competition for students increases, resources shrink, and regents, legislators, taxpayers, and prospective students and their families take up the cry for institutional accountability, institutions that put students first will succeed, even excel, just as their students will.

The credo also has an important corollary: *Student persistence to the completion of educational goals is a key indicator of student satisfaction and success.* Persistence is an individual performance indicator, and it is measurable. If information on students' goals is collected, preferably at the beginning of each term, then whether an individual student persists to the completion of his or her educational goals can be measured. On the other hand, retention is an institutional performance indicator. In this context the corollary means that student retention is the primary gauge for collectively assessing the success—defined much more broadly than just academic success—of students, and therefore of an institution. Retention, then, is not the primary goal, but it is the best indicator that an institution is meeting its goal of student satisfaction and success. It is a measure of how much student growth and learning takes place, how valued and respected students

feel on campus, and how effectively the campus delivers what students expect, need, and want. When these conditions are met, students find a way to stay in school, despite external financial and personal pressures. In sum, retention is a measure of overall “product.”

More than a decade ago we coined the phrase *student centeredness* to describe the concept as well as the spirit of campuses that were truly focused on students’ needs and, as a result, had very positive retention rates. By putting students squarely at the center of the institution, everyone benefits: students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

In this broader context, retention covers a broad span. If a student’s particular educational goals were assessed at the beginning of each term, we could measure persistence—that percentage of students who had met their goals. In the absence of such information, we generally define retention as the percentage of first-time, full-time freshmen who return to the same institution for the second term or second year of study.

Attrition is the flip side of retention, and it has consequences for the student as well as for the image and finances of an institution. An unhappy student who drops out has not only fallen short of meeting a personal goal, but also may negatively influence others about their future choice of that institution. And when a student drops out after the first term or first year, the institution suffers a significant loss of revenue in future years as a result of tuition “lost” to it.

Exhibit 3.1, the Retention Savings Worksheet, provides a way for institutions to calculate the cost of attrition and the “savings” that would occur if the dropout rate were reduced by 10 percent or 20 percent or even 30 percent. The formula does not take into consideration the costs of educating the additional students who persist. The savings is not “net, net.” However, the marginal cost of educating each additional unit of enrollment is far less than the average cost of all enrollment units. What is evident in the examples is that even the most modest reduction in attrition rate of 10 percent, meaning a reduction in attrition from 30 percent to 27 percent, would result in savings of hundreds of thousands of dollars even at a very small institution.

Scope of the Problem

In 1981, Noel and Levitz established a national database at ACT on retention and graduation rates. These data, which provide benchmarks against which individual institutions can measure their own rates, are broken down by type of institution (public or private) and by highest degree offered, as well as by academic selectivity as measured by the average ACT or SAT scores of their entering freshman class. This database has been maintained and updated annually by ACT. The most recent data available appear in Tables 3.1 through 3.4.

As the data indicate in Table 3.1, there is a linear relationship between academic ability and retention. On average, more selective institutions experience lower attrition rates than do less selective institutions. Institutions

Exhibit 3.1. Retention Savings Worksheet: Calculating the Dollar Value of Reducing Your First-to-Second-Year Dropout Rate

	<i>Sample of Public Institution</i>	<i>Sample of Private Institution</i>
I. Determine the number of students you are losing from first to second year.		
A. Enter the number of full-time, first-year students you enrolled	2,000	310
B. Enter your first-to-second-year dropout rate (express as a percentage)	.30	.37
C. Total number of students not returning (A × B)	600	115
II. Calculate the dollar value on average of retaining one full-time, first-year dropout to graduation.		
A. Enter your tuition (excluding room and board)	\$ 3,000	\$ 11,000
B. Enter your average annual per student/district appropriation (if any)	\$ 5,000	\$
C. Calculate your annual gross revenue per student (A + B)	\$ 8,000	\$ 11,000
D. Enter your average annual tuition discount (unfunded institutional financial aid)	\$ 1,500	\$ 2,970
E. Calculate your average annual net revenue per first-year student (C – D)	\$ 6,500	\$ 8,030
F. Now calculate the value on average of retaining one full-time, first-year dropout to graduation:		
1. Enter your earnings for the freshman year (.25 × E)	\$ 1,625	\$ 2,007
Assumes that, on average, you will gain some tuition revenue by saving a few freshmen who would have dropped out the first term and who instead continue enrollment (and pay tuition) for second or third term of the freshman year. Estimated tuition saved by additional term(s) of enrollment during freshman year = 25 percent.		
2. Enter your earnings for the sophomore year (.90 × E)	\$ 5,850	\$ 7,227
Assumes 90 percent of the saved freshmen* will complete the sophomore year.		
Two-year institutions, skip to G; four-year institutions, please continue.		
3. Enter your earnings for the junior year (.80 × E)	\$ 5,200	\$ 6,424
Assumes 80 percent of the saved freshmen will complete the junior year.		
4. Enter your earnings for the senior year (.70 × E)	\$ 4,550	\$ 5,621
Assumes 70 percent of the saved freshmen will complete the senior year.		
G. Total net revenue on average gained by retaining one full-time, first-year dropout to graduation: (Two-year institutions, 1 + 2; four-year institutions, 1 + 2 + 3 + 4)	\$ 17,225	\$ 21,279
III. Calculate the dollar value of reducing your first-to-second-year dropout rate.		
A. Enter the number of first-year students you are losing to attrition (I.C)	600	115
B. Enter the total net revenue gained by retaining one such student to graduation (II.G)	\$ 17,225	\$ 21,279
C. Total dollar value of reducing your first-to-second-year dropout rate by 10, 20, or 30 percent:		
➤ 10 percent reduction [(10 × A) × B]	\$1,033,500	\$ 244,709
➤ 20 percent reduction [(20 × A) × B]	\$2,067,000	\$ 489,417
➤ 30 percent reduction [(30 × A) × B]	\$3,100,500	\$ 734,126

Table 3.1. Freshman-to-Sophomore-Year Dropout Rate by Admissions Selectivity for Institutions Reporting Cut-Off Scores

<i>Selectivity Level</i>	<i>Typical Test Scores</i>			
	<i>ACT</i>	<i>SAT</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mean Percentage</i>
Highly selective	≥27.0	≥1220	120	8.4
Selective	22.0–26.9	1030–1219	414	18.3
Traditional	20.0–21.9	950–1029	696	27.1
Liberal	18.0–19.9	870–949	393	35.2
Open	<18.0	<870	892	45.7
Number of institutions			2,515	

Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 1999. (©1999. The American College Testing Program. All Rights Reserved.)

Table 3.2. Freshman-to-Sophomore-Year Dropout Rate by Type of Institution

<i>Degree Level/Control</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mean Percentage</i>
Two-year public	752	47.5
Two-year private	141	30.1
BA/BS public	66	33.3
BA/BS private	481	28.6
MA/first professional, public	231	30.5
MA/first professional, private	483	24.0
PhD public	198	23.5
PhD private	162	16.4
Number of institutions	2,514	32.6

Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 1999. (©1999. The American College Testing Program. All Rights Reserved.)

that report the highest average ACT and SAT scores have an average first-to-second-year dropout rate of less than 9 percent, with open-door institutions having a first-to-second-year dropout rate that is more than five times higher, or 46 percent. This is not to suggest that institutions should make qualitative judgments on the basis of selectivity. Selectivity may be related to the institution's mission, which may include an emphasis on access. Some of the most exciting and student-centered education can be found at open-door institutions as well as those serving average or below-average ACT/SAT-scoring incoming students. Moreover, there is great variation among similar types of institutions even when they admit students with similar levels of academic ability.

Table 3.3. Freshman-to-Sophomore-Year Dropout Rates by Type and Selectivity of Institution, Public

<i>Self-Reported Admissions Selectivity</i>		<i>Associate</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>MA</i>	<i>PhD</i>
Highly selective	Mean percentage =	NA	11.8	10.3	9.0
ACT ≥ 27.0	Number =		4	4	19
SAT ≥ 1220	Standard deviation =		4.8	3.4	4.7
Selective	Mean percentage =	NA	20.6	21.4	19.5
ACT 22.0–26.9	Number =	1	5	43	76
SAT 1030–1219	Standard deviation =		6.8	6.3	7.4
Traditional	Mean percentage =	27.7	30.3	29.1	27.6
ACT 20.0–21.9	Number =	16	24	109	76
SAT 950–1029	Standard deviation =	9.9	9.1	7.6	6.2
Liberal	Mean percentage =	45.6	34.4	34.1	32.4
ACT 18.0–19.9	Number =	45	13	35	20
SAT 870–949	Standard deviation =	12.9	10.2	9.1	9.6
Open	Mean percentage =	48.1	43.9	43.0	35.0
ACT <18	Number =	691	20	40	7
SAT <870	Standard deviation =	15.1	11.9	12.4	3.7
Number of Institutions		752	66	231	198

Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 1999. (©1999. The American College Testing Program. All Rights Reserved.)

Table 3.2 displays dropout rates by type of institution; in each case, dropout rates are lower among private institutions than they are for public institutions. Table 3.3 displays dropout rates for public institutions by type *and* admissions selectivity, and Table 3.4 displays similar data for private institutions. These data provide good benchmarks against which institutions can measure their standing.

Probably the most interesting aspect of the data is the variation in dropout rates at similar types of institutions. For example in Table 3.3, the 109 master's-degree-granting public institutions whose entering freshmen average ACT scores of 20.0 to 21.9 or SAT scores of 950 to 1029 have an average dropout rate of 29.1, with a standard deviation of 7.6. If these institutions were normally distributed, the dropout rates for 68 percent of the institutions in this group (plus or minus one standard deviation) ranged from a low of 21.5 percent to a high of 36.7 percent.

In Table 3.4, the 241 master's-degree-granting private institutions whose entering freshmen average ACT scores of 20.0 to 21.9 or SAT scores of 950 to 1029 have an average dropout rate of 25.7 percent, with a standard deviation of 8.9. If these institutions were normally distributed, the

Table 3.4. Freshman-to-Sophomore-Year Dropout Rates by Type and Selectivity of Institution, Private

<i>Self-Reported Admissions Selectivity</i>		<i>Associate</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>MA</i>	<i>PhD</i>
Highly selective	Mean percentage =	NA	7.7	9.0	7.4
ACT ≥ 27.0	Number =	1	27	23	42
SAT ≥ 1220	Standard deviation =		5.9	4.0	4.8
Selective	Mean percentage =	7.3	18.4	18.5	14.6
ACT 22.0–26.9	Number =	3	100	127	59
SAT 1030–1219	Standard deviation =	6.4	7.1	7.9	5.3
Traditional	Mean percentage =	22.8	29.2	25.7	22.8
ACT 20.0–21.9	Number =	25	155	241	50
SAT 950–1029	Standard deviation =	17.1	11.0	8.9	7.8
Liberal	Mean percentage =	32.1	36.6	30.1	34.6
ACT 18.0–19.9	Number =	72	131	68	9
SAT 870–949	Standard deviation =	16.1	14.1	10.6	12.7
Open	Mean percentage =	35.8	35.8	32.2	17.0
ACT <18	Number =	41	67	24	2
SAT <870	Standard deviation =	20.1	19.2	17.1	17.0
Number of Institutions		141	481	483	162

Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 1999. (©1999. The American College Testing Program. All Rights Reserved.)

dropout rates for 68 percent of the private institutions in this group (plus or minus one standard deviation) ranged from a low of 16.8 percent to a high of 34.6 percent. The highest standard deviations were observed in the open-door public and private associate-degree-granting institutions shown in Tables 3.3 and 3.4.

There is a reason for such wide variation within these groups of similar institutions. Institutions *can* control their dropout rates to a great extent based on the energy and effort that is put into getting students started right on the path into and through the first year of college. Institutions that provide adequate personal and programmatic support through orientation, advising, and careful attention to introductory course experiences realize lower dropout rates. This was first noted by Aubrey Forrest (1982); we too have made hundreds of similar observations on the college and university campuses we have visited.

Why Focus on the First Year?

The first-to-second-year attrition rate is perhaps the most important determinant of an institution's graduation rate. We have observed that attrition

rates are halved each subsequent year after the first year. For example, if an institution has a first-to-second year attrition rate of 30 percent for an entering freshman class, attrition after the second year is commonly half that (15 percent); it is half that again (8 percent) after the third year, 4 percent after the fourth, and 2 percent during the fifth year. The graduation rate can then be calculated by adding up these rates, and subtracting the sum from 100 percent. For this example, the five-year graduation rate would be calculated as follows: $100 \text{ percent} - (30 + 15 + 8 + 4 + 2) = 41 \text{ percent}$. Given this finding, it is clear that the most efficient way to boost graduation rates is to reduce the first-to-second-year attrition rate. Tables 3.5 and 3.6 depict graduation rates by institutional type and selectivity of entering freshman classes. The rates are calculated within three years for students pursuing associate degrees and within five years for students pursuing baccalaureate degrees.

As is true nationwide, freshmen enter with some anxiety or apprehension about beginning a new educational venture. Some of these students also bring complex educational and personal issues that dictate the need for even more comprehensive and individualized support services than institutions are currently set up to provide. And further, our recent research suggests that affective variables (such as study habits, academic confidence, desire to finish college, attitude toward educators, self-reliance, family emotional support, and openness) contribute much more to attrition than was ever thought to be the case.

Well-meaning teachers and advisers typically ask freshmen how they are doing at some point during the critical first term of the first year. And typically the answer is, "Fine," regardless of the characteristics of the student, institution, or region of the country. Yet we have found that students are not so fine after all. Listed below are some comments freshmen have made to us this past year:

- I don't know what to say to my adviser.
- I'm scared.
- I feel like giving up.
- I feel lost and confused.
- I don't know where to go.
- I don't know what I'm supposed to do.
- I don't understand what my teacher is saying.
- I don't understand what my teacher wants.
- I can't juggle kids and school and home.
- I didn't think college would be like this.
- I start something, and then I start something else.
- I could never go see my teacher after class; only the smartest students go.
- I don't know how to make new friends.
- I'll never get good grades here.
- I wasn't cut out to be a student twenty years ago, and I'm not student material now either.

Table 3.5. National Graduation Rates by Type of Institution and Level of Selectivity, Public

<i>Self-Reported Admissions Selectivity</i>		<i>Associate</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>MA</i>	<i>PhD</i>
Highly selective	Mean percentage =		70.0	67.3	72.7
ACT ≥ 27.0	Number =	NA	4	4	20
SAT ≥ 1220	Standard deviation =		15.9	12.4	12.2
Selective	Mean percentage =	NA	62.2	43.3	50.8
ACT 22.0–26.9	Number =	1	5	41	74
SAT 1030–1219	Standard deviation =		17.3	19.0	16.6
Traditional	Mean percentage =	33.1	40.8	40.2	37.3
ACT 20.0–21.9	Number =	16	22	102	75
SAT 950–1029	Standard deviation =	15.7	18.2	14.0	12.7
Liberal	Mean percentage =	42.8	42.3	30.3	34.4
ACT 18.0–19.9	Number =	45	11	33	18
SAT 870–949	Standard deviation =	22.5	20.7	13.6	20.4
Open	Mean percentage =	32.5	30.9	31.0	30.3
ACT < 18	Number =	720	12	23	6
SAT < 870	Standard deviation =	19.8	13.8	14.6	14.7
Number of Institutions		771	54	203	190

Note: Graduation in three years for associate degree; five years for BA or BS

Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 1999. (©1999. The American College Testing Program. All Rights Reserved.)

- I don't know what to do first.
- I don't think my teachers like me.
- I feel really different than the other students here.

Those of us in academia tend to assume that virtually all students are ready to succeed and persist. But in reality, we have probably overrated students' abilities in the following areas:

- Learning the norms of campus culture
- Finding a niche
- Putting down roots
- Transferring successful behaviors from other settings
- Developing focus
- Resisting peer pressures
- Compartmentalizing family and work pressures
- Exhibiting classroom habits of successful students
- Building relationships with teachers
- Asking for help

Table 3.6. National Graduation Rates by Type of Institution and Level of Selectivity, Private

<i>Self-Reported Admissions Selectivity</i>		<i>Associate</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>MA</i>	<i>PhD</i>
Highly selective	Mean percentage =		82.9	75.7	81.6
ACT ≥ 27.0	Number =	NA	29	23	41
SAT ≥ 1220	Standard deviation =		10.5	10.2	12.0
Selective	Mean percentage =	75.0	65.2	61.8	65.5
ACT 22.0–26.9	Number =	4	95	120	60
SAT 1030–1219	Standard deviation =	4.1	11.1	12.0	12.1
Traditional	Mean percentage =	66.6	52.4	52.8	50.2
ACT 20.0–21.9	Number =	23	139	218	49
SAT 950–1029	Standard deviation =	19.3	14.3	13.7	16.3
Liberal	Mean percentage =	61.5	42.1	43.1	48.2
ACT 18.0–19.9	Number =	77	93	57	9
SAT 870–949	Standard deviation =	20.4	17.8	17.6	23.3
Open	Mean percentage =	55.1	39.2	43.6	31.0
ACT <18	Number =	45	43	19	2
SAT <870	Standard deviation =	24.8	18.8	22.8	15.6
Number of Institutions		149	398	437	161

Note: Graduation in three years for associate degree; five years for BA or BS

Source: Compiled from ACT Institutional Data File, 1999. (©1999. The American College Testing Program. All Rights Reserved.)

Getting students started right on the path through the institution to graduation begins with anticipating and meeting their transition and adjustment needs when they enter. Freshmen need a prevention plan. Intrusive, proactive strategies must be used to reach freshmen before the students have an opportunity to experience feelings of failure, disappointment, and confusion.

Withdrawing-student surveys always list money, time, and personal reasons in answer to the question of why they are leaving. Yet our experience indicates that these are but the surface reasons. Levitz and Hovland (1998) have listed five categories of issues facing students that ultimately have an impact on the decision to drop out:

Personal: Lost, stressed, closed to new ideas and experiences, undisciplined, unmotivated, insecure, uninformed, unrealistic expectations, student-institution mismatch

Social: Alienation and social isolation, subject to negative peer pressure, uninvolved in college activities, little involvement with faculty members or advisers

Academic: Underprepared, underchallenged, poor study habits, does not see value in assignments and courses, low academic performance, part-time course load, lack of educational and career goals, feedback that is too little too late

Life issues: Insecurity about financial circumstances, job and school time conflicts, home and family difficulties, personal problems, health problems, college not necessary to meet career goals

Institutional issues: Experience the run-around; experience operational problems (for example, in billing and scheduling); experience negative attitudes in classrooms, advising centers, administrative offices; experience poor or indifferent teaching; encounter instructional equipment or technology that is out of date; academic program not available

Students may well have the potential to be highly motivated, independent student-scholars. However, hundreds of anecdotal reports from faculty and staff members across the nation indicate that a majority of the students today lack the level of independence, skill, and savvy of students in years past. This evidence suggests that a primary goal for an institution should be to move students from low or no levels of commitment (intellectual, emotional, social) to the point where they become independent learners. But the assumption that most students come in as truly independent learners is far too common and thereby inhibits the active, even intrusive programming needed to reduce dropout rates. Institutions must find ways to partner with students to cause the kind of transformational development to take place that will move those who are prone to drop out into the persisters' camp.

A Step-by-Step Approach to Retention Results

Virtually every program, person, and procedure on a campus has the potential to have an impact on students, and therefore on retention. But there are conflicting axioms: when everyone is responsible, no one is responsible; when no one is responsible, nothing gets done. And the job is simply too big for one person or one office to handle. Yet there is a step-by-step path out of this conundrum that several hundred institutions have followed.

For maximum impact, retention improvement efforts can proceed on two planes: an immediate individualized approach that can be quickly implemented and a longer-term effort that will lead to substantive, long-lasting changes in institutional culture.

Immediate Individualized Approach. While a task force is organizing and broader retention issues are being discussed and researched, campuses have begun to take concrete steps to jump-start their retention improvement effort. The successful implementation of an individualized student approach delivers substantial results almost immediately because it is based on the concept that attitude and motivation are better predictors of who stays and who leaves than are traditional cognitive measures. By building on this

research-based insight, an institution can identify specific dropout prevention plans for incoming students and, importantly, leverage time. Very few institutions today have unlimited resources for helping students get a good start in college. Therefore, an institution that is able to direct resources of time, energy, and money toward students who are most likely to be prone to drop out, who most need and want help, *and* who are willing to be helped has truly leveraged its resources.

Nearly five hundred colleges and universities are using the Retention Management System (RMS) to identify the extent to which their incoming freshmen are prone to drop out, and if so, what type of intervention will be needed and whether the student will be receptive to that intervention. These schools report that this system enables them to fold a triage approach into their retention practice. The RMS uses scales to identify degrees of dropout-proneness and receptivity to help. The school can therefore reach out immediately to the most dropout-prone students who are likely to be responsive. As resources are available, they then focus attention on subsequent levels of dropout-prone students.

Colleges and universities report increased retention success from working with students who did not appear to be at risk because their traditional cognitive performance (high school grades and test scores) was adequate, while the RMS uncovered attitudinal and motivational issues that may have led to dropout-prone behavior if left unchecked.

Longer-Term Approach. Maximum improvement in retention performance requires implementation of programs that lead to long-lasting campus culture changes. The best retention programs have the following characteristics:

Highly structured. Student success is not left to chance. The institution views itself as responsible for creating a success structure rather than merely retaining a reactive sink-or-swim philosophy.

Extended, intensive contact with students who are most likely to drop out.

For these students retention is a one-on-one activity, and results are predicated on a personal relationship. In order to get retention power out of academic advising, advisors need to understand the affective needs and motivation levels of the individual student and time to establish a relationship.

Interlocks with other programs and services. For example, academic advising should be woven into the fabric of a required freshman success course.

A strategy of engagement. Students are brought into situations in which the risk of participation is reduced. That is, the faculty or staff member takes the initiative to reach out to bring the student into the fold rather than assume a passive stance that offers students the opportunity to participate.

Qualified staff. Qualifications go far beyond credentials for a position to include attitude and ability to build relationships. There is increased

emphasis on the importance of a student-centered environment everywhere on campus. This message is communicated clearly at point of hire and is reinforced through follow-up development and training activities.

A critical role for faculty members. It is extraordinarily important to have rewards and recognition in place for excellent teaching. A single “Teacher of the Year” award is too unattainable and further sends a message that great teaching, especially in the freshman classroom, is nice but not necessary. Ultimately the tenure and promotion criteria established and adhered to are the determiners of whether intense energy is devoted to becoming a great teacher in the freshman classroom. Until that happens, providing “great teaching” awards, with modest monetary awards, for 10 to 20 percent of the teaching faculty will begin to capture the attention of faculty members, causing some to adjust their classroom behavior.

A focus on the affective as well as cognitive needs of students. Far too little attention is usually paid to how students are coping: whether they are getting connected to the new environment or feeling lost, confused, or overwhelmed. Attention to the individual needs of students can set them on a course for success.

Improving retention means change, which never comes easily. Some will protest, “We’ve always done it this way!” or “We don’t have the money [or time].” Following are some tips for getting started with the change process.

Establish a retention task force, even if the campus already has a retention coordinator. Commitment to the cause is most readily gained when people have a chance to participate. Because so much institutional power rests with the faculty, it is critical that task force membership be heavily weighted toward the academic side of the campus—while taking great care to reinforce the valuable role played by student affairs staff.

The initial task force members should be those who see students as individuals and have a passion for watching them grow, develop, and succeed. It is likely to be counterproductive to include cynics or those who believe in the sink-or-swim approach. Such members tend to extend the debate and needlessly delay the development and implementation of action plans.

If a retention task force has been in existence for some time and results have not been forthcoming, a separate task force on student success should be established.

Carefully select the person to head the retention task force. This person, so central to the task force’s success, needs the vision and the courage to activate it. It is essential that the task force have the weight of the office of the president behind it. The retention task force puts forth the recommended platform, and the president backs it with necessary resources, clearing institutional obstacles that may arise. (On a large university campus, this effort might initially be more effective if undertaken within an individual

school, for example, the College of Arts and Sciences, rather than throughout the university.)

Make sure the task force spends a minimum amount of time studying the issue despite the natural tendency to want to explore every potential alternative. The majority of the task force's time should be spent deciding on a plan of action that fits the campus. Before that can take place, the affected parties and the institution need to establish priorities for retention improvement effort. The most effective way of determining those priorities is to assess what is most important to students and how satisfied they are with each of these areas. A student satisfaction inventory is an ideal tool to identify performance gaps—areas to attack first. On the other hand, there should not be too many initiatives. Most campuses that establish seventeen or more initiatives may feel as if they have a comprehensive, campuswide plan, but they lack the focus and intensity needed to get results. The task force should start with two to four priorities that are most critical and then mobilize the energy and resources necessary to make them happen.

Establish a readiness to accept change across the campus by promoting a widespread understanding of what retention is and what it is not. Data can be drawn on to debunk the myths (such as that dropouts are flunkouts) and clearly identify the potential benefits for all parties if retention improves. Forums for discussing ideas for good retention practice and the planks of the retention platform will be fleshed out in this process. These efforts will minimize the extent to which people on campus feel compelled to protect their turf, and the natural resistance to change will be somewhat reduced by helping people across campus understand the benefits of improved retention. (This may need to be done within schools in a university.)

Go for big gains. Small pilot programs, programs that are designed solely for academically high-risk students, and minor revisions in existing orientation or advising programs seldom get broad enough or impressive enough results to convince the skeptics (or even supporters) that the program has high gain potential.

Pilot programs involve too few students to reduce the dropout rate. Further, their design often is based on students who volunteer, and are therefore less likely to drop out anyway, or students who are so at risk that the results cannot be generalized. Pilot programs are useful in perfecting a program's design and delivery strategies. After this initial test stage, it is tempting to launch increasingly larger pilot projects, but in our experience, these efforts usually run out of steam before producing exciting results. It is far more effective to launch a new program, such as a student success course, with an entire incoming freshman class, and then conduct a retrospective comparison of retention rates with a previous entering class, controlling for academic ability and achievement as measured by ACT or SAT scores.

Celebrate successes! There is nothing like a party atmosphere to reenergize people who feel burned out. Some of the most creative, low-cost

rewards we have seen for members of the retention task force include highly prized campus parking spots reserved for a month, tickets to popular campus athletic events, certificates for dinner in a local restaurant, and movie passes or tickets to a campus concert or play, as well as the ever-popular dinner at the president's house, cooked by the president. These work equally well for stellar advisers, counselors, and faculty members who make a tremendous difference in the lives of students.

Even a small monetary incentive pays big dividends. Modest stipends when combined with recognition do wonders to motivate people to the next level of performance.

Setting the Retention Agenda. In our experience, campuses attempt to work on too broad a retention agenda, which has a number of negative consequences. Not only are there no successes to celebrate, but everyone feels defeated. Prioritizing a retention improvement agenda is critical. To date nearly nine hundred institutions have used the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) to establish retention priorities. The SSI determines levels of importance that students assign to various aspects of the institution as well as their level of satisfaction with each of these. This two-dimensional approach allows institutions to calculate “performance gaps”—by subtracting satisfaction scores from importance scores—that permit the identification of student concerns that ultimately affect student success and persistence. By illuminating which aspects of the campus experience students consider most and least important, along with how satisfied students are in these areas, the SSI provides a vehicle for institutions to set priorities that are closely aligned with those of their students.

Tables 3.7 through 3.9 present the most recent National Student Satisfaction Report by institutional type. Each item on the SSI is expressed as a statement of expectation, and students are asked to rate the level of importance they assign to the expectation as well as their level of satisfaction that the expectation is being met by their campus. The rating scale ranges from 1 (low) to 7 (high). The performance gap is calculated by subtracting the Satisfaction ranking from the Importance ranking. When these data are collected on individual campuses, the size of the performance gap in relation to an item's importance helps determine whether the item should be addressed as part of a retention effort. Nearly all institutions also compare their students' level of satisfaction with each aspect with those of students in similar types of institutions. This gives them a general measure of how their performance measures up to performance in other similar type institutions.

Table 3.7 contains data from 158,133 students in four-year public institutions and displays the top twenty-five items (out of seventy-three) in order of importance. The first six items given the highest importance ranking by students focus on academic-related issues: content of courses, quality of instruction, the extent to which teachers and advisers are knowledgeable, and the ability to register for needed classes.

Table 3.7. Student Satisfaction Rating, Four-Year Public Colleges and Universities

<i>Item</i>	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Performance Gap</i>
The content of the courses within my major is valuable.	6.56	5.27	1.29
The instruction in my major field is excellent.	6.54	5.22	1.32
I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	6.54	4.55	1.99
Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field.	6.51	5.52	0.99
My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.	6.50	5.31	1.19
The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	6.49	5.10	1.39
The campus is safe and secure for all students.	6.45	5.16	1.29
My academic advisor is approachable.	6.42	5.21	1.21
There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	6.42	5.22	1.20
Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.	6.41	4.93	1.48
Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	6.38	4.85	1.53
Major requirements are clear and reasonable.	6.37	5.10	1.27
Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	6.35	5.35	1.00
I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	6.33	5.34	0.99
Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	6.30	4.77	1.53
Library resources and services are adequate.	6.27	5.01	1.26
There is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus.	6.26	5.05	1.21
The campus staff are caring and helpful.	6.24	4.91	1.33
My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.	6.24	4.90	1.34
Adequate financial aid is available for most students.	6.23	4.34	1.89
Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	6.22	4.73	1.49
Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.	6.21	4.60	1.61
It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.	6.21	5.05	1.16
The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.	6.20	2.91	3.29
This institution shows concern for students as individuals.	6.20	4.63	1.57

National Student Satisfaction Report. Iowa City, Iowa: Noel-Levitz, 1999. Available online at <http://www.noellevitz.com/res/research/99studsatre.pdf>

Note: The scale ranges from 1 (not important/not satisfied at all) to 7 (very important/very satisfied).

Table 3.8. Student Satisfaction Rating, Four-Year Private Colleges and Universities

<i>Item</i>	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Performance Gap</i>
The content of the courses within my major is valuable.	6.62	5.50	1.12
The instruction in my major field is excellent.	6.60	5.45	1.15
Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field.	6.55	5.74	0.81
The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	6.54	5.43	1.11
I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	6.49	4.93	1.56
My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.	6.47	5.49	0.98
Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.	6.47	4.75	1.72
The campus is safe and secure for all students.	6.44	5.45	0.99
I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	6.43	5.52	0.91
Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	6.41	5.08	1.33
There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	6.41	5.10	1.31
My academic advisor is approachable.	6.40	5.53	0.87
Adequate financial aid is available for most students.	6.40	4.67	1.73
There is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus.	6.37	5.43	1.24
Major requirements are clear and reasonable.	6.37	5.38	0.99
It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.	6.35	5.26	1.09
Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	6.35	5.56	0.79
The campus staff are caring and helpful.	6.34	5.40	0.94
This institution shows concern for students as individuals.	6.34	5.22	1.12
Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	6.31	4.80	1.51
My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.	6.27	5.29	0.98
Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	6.27	5.39	0.88
Faculty care about me as an individual.	6.25	5.35	0.90
Library resources and services are adequate.	6.25	4.73	1.52
Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	6.24	5.01	1.23

National Student Satisfaction Report. Iowa City, Iowa: Noel-Levitz, 1999.

Notes: The scale ranges from 1 (not important/not satisfied at all) to 7 (very important/very satisfied).

Table 3.8 contains data from 261,934 students and displays the top 25 items (out of 73) in order of importance.

Table 3.9. Student Satisfaction Rating, Community, Junior, and Technical Colleges

<i>Item</i>	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Performance Gap</i>
The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	6.48	5.53	0.95
Classes are scheduled at times that are convenient for me.	6.45	5.33	1.12
I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	6.33	5.25	1.08
Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their fields.	6.33	5.60	0.73
There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	6.29	5.38	0.91
I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	6.28	5.54	0.74
The campus is safe and secure for all students.	6.27	5.33	0.94
My academic advisor is knowledgeable about my program requirements.	6.26	5.28	0.98
Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	6.24	5.18	1.06
Program requirements are clear and reasonable.	6.24	5.41	0.83
This school does whatever it can to help me reach my educational goals.	6.21	5.07	1.14
Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	6.21	5.50	0.71
My academic advisor is approachable.	6.19	5.34	0.85
Library resources and services are adequate.	6.19	5.19	1.00
Adequate financial aid is available for most students.	6.17	4.96	1.21
Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	6.16	5.11	1.05
Students are notified early in the term if they are doing poorly in a class.	6.16	4.86	1.30
Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.	6.15	4.84	1.31
Policies and procedures regarding registration and course selection are clear and well-publicized.	6.15	5.30	0.85
The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.	6.15	4.24	1.91
The equipment in the lab facilities is kept up to date.	6.14	5.09	1.05
The personnel involved in registration are helpful.	6.13	5.29	0.84
The college shows concern for students as individuals.	6.13	4.98	1.15
Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	6.13	5.17	0.96
There are convenient ways of paying my school bill.	6.13	5.17	0.96

National Student Satisfaction Report. Iowa City, Iowa: Noel-Levitz, 1999.

Notes: The scale ranges from 1 (not important/not satisfied at all) to 7 (very important/very satisfied).

Table 3.9 contains data from 181,278 students and displays the top 25 items (out of 73) in order of importance.

These data and their importance rankings are critical in prioritizing areas for improvement on a given campus. Consider, for example, the amount of available student parking, which is often a topic of conversation and complaint on campus, yet it is listed twenty-fourth in importance. Students are not likely to feel satisfied with parking unless they are practically guaranteed a parking space directly in front of their class building. Therefore, addressing the parking issue would not be as critical a retention agenda item as making certain that students are able to register for needed classes. That is the third item listed in importance and has a performance gap of 1.99. Increasing student satisfaction in this area and thereby closing this perceived performance gap will pay retention dividends.

Expectations are critical: they serve as the point from which students make qualitative judgments about an institution. Measuring the level of student satisfaction outside the context of what is expected (or the level of importance) is incomplete, and perhaps even dangerous. Such practice frequently leads to doing things right rather than doing the right things.

Overcoming the “No-Money Syndrome”

Institutions that elect to invest additional dollars into bringing their recruitment operations to state-of-the-art levels get state-of-the-art results quickly. Yet even in those institutions, it seems that there are never extra dollars available to breathe more life into retention-related people and programming.

Too often, reducing the dropout rate is not recognized as one of the most effective ways to add full-time equivalents, thereby broadening an institution's revenue base. Our research shows that by reducing the number of freshmen dropouts by a single student, a four-year institution will, on average, “save” \$15,000 to \$25,000 in gross revenue over four to five years. (See Exhibit 3.1.) Investing in retention programming is good business. Few, if any, other institutional investments will yield such a high return.

Increased retention results in substantial savings for even the smallest of institutions, and millions of dollars to the largest.

Beyond the budgetary impact of improved retention, increases in student satisfaction are worth their weight in gold as current students talk with prospective students in their families, schools, workplaces, and home towns. Student success and institutional success are truly inseparable.

References

- Forrest, A. *Increasing Student Competence and Persistence*. Iowa City, Iowa: ACT National Center for the Advancement of Educational Practices, 1982.
- Levitz, R., and Hovland, M. “Dropout Prone Students.” In Noel, L., and Levitz, R. (eds.), *Power Strategies for Recruitment and Retention Workshop Notebook*. Iowa City: Noel-Levitz, 1998.

RANDI S. LEVITZ is senior executive and cofounder of Noel-Levitz and is nationally recognized for her pathbreaking work in retention and enrollment management.

LEE NOEL is senior executive and cofounder of Noel-Levitz, who has pioneered retention programs and is nationally recognized for providing comprehensive enrollment management counsel.

BETH J. RICHTER is program consultant at Noel-Levitz who specializes in intervention programs designed to increase student success and retention.

