

## Retention and College Counseling Centers

**Brian Van Brunt**

Students with personal problems and psychological issues often struggle academically and are at risk for dropping out of school. Counseling has been shown to address these issues while having a positive impact on students remaining in school. Students who make use of counseling stay in school at a higher rate when compared to those who do not use counseling services.

There is a good deal of literature on the relationship between students' utilization of counseling services and the corresponding retention rate of these students. This article reviews three key findings and explores ways counseling centers should approach retention issues.

### 1. Students with social and emotional problems are at risk for dropping out.

In their longitudinal assessment, Turner and Berry (2000) found that one in five of those students attending counseling was considering withdrawing from the university as a result of personal problems. They found that 70 percent of the students who attended counseling reported their personal problems had an impact on their academic performance.

Several studies (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Bray, Braxton, & Sullivan, 1999) have examined the prediction of a student dropping out based on socio-emotional adjustment problems. They found these problems predicted as well as, or better than, academic adjustment for freshmen students.

Students who drop out of college often have socio-emotional problems that could be well addressed by proactive counseling services.

### 2. Students in counseling have a higher retention rate than those who are not.

Turner and Berry (2000) report a retention rate of 85 percent for students involved in counseling compared to 74 percent for the general student body. Wilson, Mason, and Ewing (1997) found a 14 percent retention advantage for students who received counseling over a control group of students who were either placed on a waitlist or did not attend their counseling appointment. This study was replicated at Southern Illinois University in 2001. Dr. Tylka found counseling students had a 25 percent graduation rate over those students who did not receive counseling.

Illovsy (1997) examined freshmen students during their first semester and then again two semesters later. Students who attended counseling had a retention rate of 75 percent compared to 68 percent of the general student population. Frank and Kirk (1975) conducted a five-year study with 2,400 Berkeley students in which they found higher graduation rates for students who received counseling or psychiatric services.

### 3. Counseling helps students address their difficulties and remain in school.

Several studies (Bishop & Walker, 1990; Campbell, 1965; Weiss & Giddan, 1986) identify the positive impact of

counseling services for students identified as retention risks. Bishop and Brennehan (1986) examined college students who sought counseling because they were considering dropping out of school or worried about failing. They found that 86 percent of these students enrolled for at least another semester.

Clark, Wettersten, and Mason (1999) reported that students who participated in counseling had positive changes measured in their quality of life satisfaction—a more predictive measure of student retention than GPA alone. Campbell (1965) found a direct relationship between academic success and counseling participation.

### How should counseling centers approach retention?

Retention for retention's sake cannot be a counseling center's prime directive. If students are disruptions to the college community or unhappy about their

► *continued on page 2*

## In This Issue

3

**SAT-Optional Admissions:  
Reasons to Take Another Look**

6

**Looking at the Costs of Student  
Acquisition and Attrition**

8

**Are We Prepared for "Seismic  
Demographic Shifts"?**

▼ **Counseling Centers** from page 1

choice to go to college, it may be best for these students to leave school. Likewise, there may be times when the removal of a particular student is better for the overall retention goals of the university.

Each college must develop retention goals that take into account high-risk students, who require extra services, and those disruptive students whose removal from school would have a positive impact

on the remaining community. A 100 percent retention goal is neither desirable nor achievable.

An individual student's negative behaviors can have an enormous impact on a college. Kitzrow (2003) documented the tendency for mental health problems to significantly interfere or impair the ability of students to function in an academic environment. This impairment rarely occurs in a vacuum and often impacts other students' academic performance.

As Rummel, Acton, Costello, and Gillan (1999) remarked, "A University does not want to retain students who are not academically suited for their environment" (p. 243). While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires colleges to protect students' rights and provide reasonable accommodations for them to be successful, there are times where a student's behavior should be seen within the context of the good of the greater community.

While research evidence supports the positive role of counseling on retention, this data should not be the only measure of evaluating counseling service's effectiveness (Sharkin, 2004). The main purpose of counseling centers is not to keep students enrolled, though they still need to take an active role in assessing retention and attrition issues. Retention assessment should be viewed as a positive outcome of their services.

### The role of outcome surveys

Many counseling centers have addressed this area within their outcome surveys. UNLV Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) director Dr. Jamie Davidson included the following questions on their intake form: "Are you considering dropping out of school?" and "If yes, to what degree are the issues that brought you to counseling contributing to your thoughts of dropping out?"

Questions were scored on a 1 to 5 Likert scale with the scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much." His associate director, Dr. Ann Shanklin, found that those who endorsed these questions at a high level, putting them at risk for dropping out, were retained in the 86–98 percent level.

While retention is not always consid-

ered a central issue for counseling directors and psychologists, further exploration of the relationship between counseling and retention should be considered—particularly when this could be assessed through simple additions to existing outcome questionnaires. This data could be used to bolster the importance of adequate counseling services for today's college students.

### Staffing issues

Given that personal counseling has a positive impact on student retention (Bishop & Walker, 1990; Clark et al., 1999; Illovsky, 1997; Weiss & Giddan, 1986), higher quality counseling programs will have an increasingly positive impact on student retention. Wilson et al. (1997) reported retention rates were highest for students who received at least six sessions of psychological counseling.

Sharkin (2004) suggested counseling centers "collaborate with academic support services; indeed, such collaboration may be particularly effective in retention efforts" (p. 104). Providing an increased number of sessions and encouraging counseling staff to work more collaboratively with other support services will require adequate staffing levels and the corresponding budget to support these efforts.

These higher quality programs should have adequate staff to student ratios (the International Association of Counseling Services suggests 1:1500) and allow staff to provide prevention programming, mental health screenings, and advertising to increase service utilization. Counseling centers must also have adequate budgets to allow for necessary training and support of its existing staff.

### Collaborative approach

Retention and attrition issues impact all departments on campus. Counseling centers should track and promote their work in this area to demonstrate both a collaborative approach with other university departments and to advocate for additional staffing and budget to support high-quality programs. As Turner and Berry (2000) wrote, "Counseling centers

► continued on page 3

**recruitment & RETENTION**  
in higher education

President: William Haight  
whaight@magnapubs.com

Publisher: David Burns  
dburns@magnapubs.com

Editor: Catherine Stover  
catherine.stover@magnapubs.com

Creative Services Manager: Mark Manghera

Art Director: Debra Lovelien

Customer Service Manager: Mark Beyer

EDITORIAL BOARD

Jim Carr, *Harding University*  
John Garland, *University of Maryland*  
Linda M. Jansky, *Rivier College*  
Johnny D. Jones, *Arkansas Baptist College*  
Lucie Lapovsky, *Mercy College*  
Joan Marques, *Woodbury University*  
Earnest Pascarella, *University of Iowa*  
Brian VanderSchee, *Aurora University*

*Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education* (ISSN 0891-012X) is published monthly by Magna Publications Inc., 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Phone 800-433-0499 or 608-246-3590. Email: [custserv@magnapubs.com](mailto:custserv@magnapubs.com). Fax: 608-246-3597. Website: [www.magnapubs.com](http://www.magnapubs.com). One-year subscription: \$257 (Multiple print subscriptions and Group Online Subscriptions are available.) Photocopying or other reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to *Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education*, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Copyright © 2008, Magna Publications Inc.

To order back issues (\$25 each) or for more information about multiple print subscription discounts and Group Online Subscriptions, call Customer Service at 800-433-0499.

Submissions to *Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education* are welcome. Please review article submission guidelines located at [www.magnapubs.com/aboutus/authorguidelines.html](http://www.magnapubs.com/aboutus/authorguidelines.html)

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use of specific clients is granted by *Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education* for users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transactional Reporting Service, provided that \$1.00 per page is paid directly to CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923; Phone 978-750-8400; [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). For those organizations that have been granted a photocopy license by CCC, a separate system of payment has been arranged.

### ▼ Counseling Centers *from page 2*

need to be encouraged to take an active and leading role in assessing the value of their services and their potential contributions to reducing the number of students who leave college due to personal difficulties” (p. 634).

*Brian Van Brunt, EdD, is the director of counseling and testing services at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green.*

### References

- Bishop, J. B., & Walker, S. K. (1990). What role does counseling play in decisions relating to retention? *Journal of College Student Development*, 31, 88–89.
- Bishop, J. & Breneman, K. (1986). An initial assessment of a counseling center’s role in retention. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 27, 416–462.
- Bray, N. J., Braxton, J. M., & Sullivan, A. S. (1999). The influence of stress-related coping strategies on college student departure decisions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40, 645–657.
- Campbell, D. P. (1965). *The results of counseling: Twenty-five years later*. Philadelphia: Saunders.
- Clark, M. P., Wettersten, K. B., & Mason, T. W. (1999). The Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI) as a measure of therapeutic outcome and predictor of academic retention. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, MA.
- Frank, A., & Kirk, B. (1975). Differences in outcome for users and nonusers of university counseling and psychiatric services: A five-year accountability study. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 22, 252–258.
- Gerdes, H., & Mallinckrodt, B. (1994). Emotional, social, and academic adjustment of college students: A longitudinal study of retention. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 72, 281–288.
- Illovsky, M. E. (1997). Effects of counseling on grades and retention. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 12(1), 29–44.
- Kitzrow, M. A. (2003). The mental health needs of today’s college students: Challenges and recommendations. *NASPA Journal*, 41, 165–173.
- Rummel, A., Acton, D., Costello, S., & Pielow, G. (1999). Is all retention good? An empirical study. *College Student Journal*, 33, 241–246.
- Sharkin, B. (2004). College counseling and student retention: Research findings and the implications for counseling centers. *Journal of College Counseling*, 7, 99–108.
- Turner, A., & Berry, T. R., (2000). Counseling center contributions to student retention and graduation: A longitudinal assessment. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(6), 627–635.
- Weiss, S. J., & Giddan, N. S. (1986). Applications of cost effectiveness to counseling center retention programs. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 27, 260–268.
- Wilson, S. B., Mason, T. W., & Ewing, M. J. M. (1997). Evaluating the impact of receiving university-based counseling services on student retention. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 44, 316–320. ✓

## SAT-Optional Admissions: Reasons to Take Another Look

**Jonathan P. Epstein**

**S**AT-optional policy announcements often cite potential biases in the test, differential scoring by income and by race, and a desire to remove “SAT pandemonium” from the admissions process. Many announcements include statements such as, “The best predictor of success is your high school achievement,” or “You can decide for yourself if your scores adequately reflect your abilities and potential for success in college,” and “Standardized tests have long been scrutinized for possible cultural, ethnic, gender, and class bias.”

Nearly all adopting institutions immediately attract more applicants—and significantly more ethnically diverse applicants—in addition to boosting test-score statistics and the institution’s overall reputation. Non-submitting enrolled students frequently have comparable high school GPAs and high school class ranks

to their score-submitting counterparts.

Where data are available, they show that such students achieve comparable college GPAs and graduation rates. For all institutions that share the data, SAT-optional policies broaden the student body and do no harm to the quality of the student body, as measured by precollegiate and collegiate academic achievement.

### Reasons to dig deeper

Public statements share noble and socially responsible messages. But, do they tell the entire story?

**Shortcut:** Many, including Reed College president Colin Diver, who penned an op-ed on the topic in the *New York Times* in fall 2006, have concerns that SAT-optional policies are, at least in part, a mere shortcut to genuine outreach and effective student recruitment.

**Inconsistency:** SAT-optional policies

allow the students—not the institution—to determine if the assessment “represents their abilities accurately.” Is there any other academic measure that colleges relinquish to the student’s discretion? No. Institutions do not allow students to pick and choose among course grades, submitting a graded writing sample from a particular class for which they believe a course grade is not representative of their ability.

So, why would an institution that distrusts the SAT’s validity continue to evaluate any applicants using the test? How could it be justified that scores are meaningful in evaluating a student’s abilities when those scores are submitted but irrelevant when they are withheld? There is inherent inconsistency. At best, the inconsistencies logically lead to a breakdown in the purpose and value of holistic admissions review. At worst,

➤ *continued on page 4*

▼ **SAT-Optional** *from page 3*

they risk being perceived as hypocritical.

**Accuracy of reported SAT averages:** Perhaps the greatest concern is how the absences of some scores affect the institution's reported SAT average. Do most institutions report the scores of only the students who choose to submit them, or do they gather scores from all students, including non-submitters, after enrollment, and report an inclusive SAT average to ranking publications and guidebooks and on their Web sites?

We decided to find out. We reviewed all 28 institutions that are SAT-optional in some form that are included in *U.S. News' Top 100 Liberal Arts Colleges 2007*. Admissions Web sites, U.S. News profiles, and direct contact with each undergraduate admissions office revealed that *only one of the 28 asserted that it reported a full SAT average*. Only one institution required all students who took the test to submit scores after enrolling and used those scores when calculating their institution's average.

Four institutions declined to respond to multiple inquiries, although available information suggests these four also report biased averages. In our research of publicly available studies and confidential internal assessments, we conclude

that SAT scores for non-submitters are 100–150 points lower than submitters; therefore, eliminating those scores for 25 percent to 50 percent of enrolling students increases the institution's average SAT score between 25 and 75 points.

It appears that 27 of the 28 SAT-optional institutions are the beneficiaries of these SAT-average boosts. In light of this discovery, there is little choice but to conclude that the critics' concerns are well founded.

**Implications**

What happens if the trend continues? What if there are 100 selective institutions with SAT-optional policies in five years instead of about 40 today? Will more institutions be "forced" to adopt SAT-optional policies simply to compete for a diverse pool of applicants? When a market shifts, some outcomes are unpredictable.

However, a few practical implications for students are easy to imagine. While SAT-optional policies currently encourage more applications as reported SAT averages rise, students who might previously have been a good fit for the institution may be discouraged from applying if their scores are too far below the reported average.

Or, over time, fewer and fewer students may submit scores, further distorting the reported SAT average and further confusing prospective students.

Unless SAT-optional institutions forego those policies by making the exam a requirement or removing it from consideration entirely or being more forthright about the fact that their SAT averages represent only a self-selected portion of their students, this marketplace competition may completely disorient prospective students and families. A disoriented customer market is not in the best interests of any institution or higher education in general.

Today, *all* SAT-optional institutions continue to display their SAT averages on their Web sites, in their publications, and in third-party publications despite the fact that the average represents only a part of the student body. Right now, they have it both ways. But, we must ask who benefits? And is it truly helpful to students?

*Jonathan P. Epstein is a senior consultant with Maguire Associates. This article is a modified excerpt from his upcoming report, "Behind the SAT-Optional Movement: Context and Controversy." For more information, write to jepstein@maguireassoc.com. ✓*

▼ **Demographics** *from page 8*

The WICHE report, which historically has had a 5 percent variance for accuracy on high school graduate projections, gives us cause for hope. The 2007–2008 glory days of a record number of high school graduates will return and actually be exceeded in 2021–22, but the shift in population groups is likely to become even more prominent.

Meanwhile, the nation's educational system must prepare itself to receive the underserved populations in all facets of curriculum, academic preparation, and support if our institutions are to remain viable and socially responsible.

*Linda H. Fitzhugh is the vice president for Enrollment Services at LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas.*

**References**

American Council on Education. Solutions for our Future: Individual Benefits of Higher Education. Retrieved from [www.acenet.edu/](http://www.acenet.edu/).

Oldfield, K. (January/February 2007). Humble and Hopeful: Welcoming First-Generation Poor and Working-Class Students to College. *About Campus*. Vol. II, No. 6.

Schroeder, S. (August 8, 2006). The U.S. Hispanic Population – One Market or

Many? *DMNews*.

Weaver, L., and Marquez, J. *Characteristics of Hispanic Families*. Paper presented at University of Houston-Clear Lake, School of Education. Retrieved from <http://prtl.uhcl.edu/portal/page/portal/CSLT/Modules/Hispanic%20Families%20module1.ppt>

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. (March 2008). *Knocking at the College Door*. Retrieved from <http://www.wiche.edu/policy/knocking/1992-2022/>

Williams, T. (2002). *Are You Ready for the Next Generation of Students?* Noel-Levitz White Paper. ✓

# NewsWire

## **National Dialog on Student Retention:**

Dr. George Kuh will be the keynote speaker at a conference on bolstering student engagement and retention, sponsored by EducationDynamics, on June 3 in Atlanta. According to conference organizers, participants will discuss challenges and best-practice solutions for student retention, and will leave the conference with actionable steps that can be applied at their institutions to engage and retain more students.

In addition to Dr. Kuh, speakers include Dr. Kenneth Hartman, Drexel University; Dr. George Walker, Florida International University; and Carol Aslanian, Aslanian Group, Inc. Catherine Stover, editor of *Recruitment & Retention*, will moderate a panel discussion. For more information, please go to [www.educationdynamics.com/retention\\_conference/](http://www.educationdynamics.com/retention_conference/).

**NIU, Virginia Tech shootings have impact on college admissions:** We recommend reading the *Chicago Tribune's* recent article (at [www.chicagotribune.com/](http://www.chicagotribune.com/)) with this title. It describes the pressure that admissions offices are facing to seek more information about applicants with possible mental illnesses, despite federal privacy laws that prevent them from doing so.

The article quotes Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers as noting that, while admissions committees know something about predicting academic performance, they can't predict "who does or does not pose a threat. This is complex stuff that, frankly, we're not very good at."

A smarter strategy, according to Dr. Paul Appelbaum, an expert on psychiatry, law, and ethics at Columbia University, is to provide adequate mental health services and insurance coverage for students and to implement outreach programs that encourage them to use the services.

## **Educational video on paying for college:**

A free, 24-minute video written by *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* magazine and underwritten by Sallie Mae describes a "1-2-3 approach" to paying for college: First, apply for grants and scholarships; second, fully exhaust federal loans; third, fill any gaps with private education loans. To view the video, go to [www.kiplinger.com/money/payingforcollege/](http://www.kiplinger.com/money/payingforcollege/).

## **Drop in enrollment of black students**

**at USC:** According to University of South Carolina's student newspaper *The Daily Gamecock*, the number of black freshmen entering the university dropped by 32 percent between 2000 and 2007. In 2004, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* identified USC as having the highest black student enrollment of any flagship university in the nation, but a downward trend has occurred since then.

Dennis Pruitt, vice president of student affairs, said that because overall freshman enrollment has increased, the number of African-Americans isn't properly represented in these percentages. However, Roderick Moore, director of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, says, "The alumni are concerned; community people are concerned; current students are concerned."

**Lengthening the wait lists:** More colleges are lengthening their wait lists, says an article titled "Student agony grows along with top colleges' wait lists" in the *Boston Globe*. It notes that while colleges have typically been able to estimate with a fair degree of confidence the percentage of accepted students who will enroll in the fall, this year, several factors are making them hedge their bets: a shaky economy, record numbers of applicants, and sweeping financial aid expansions.

How well are you able to predict how many of your potential students actually appear on campus in the fall? We'd like to hear from readers on this issue. Tell us

about your situation by emailing [Catherine.stover@magnapubs.com/](mailto:Catherine.stover@magnapubs.com/).

**Admitting out-of-state students:** Linda H. Fitzhugh, the author of our article on the new shifts in student population demographics, is not the only one to write about out-of-state students recently. The *New York Times'* Jonathan D. Glater wrote an article that we recommend, titled "Colleges Reduce Out-of-State Tuition to Lure Students."

He notes that while flagship public universities have long sought a national student body in their quest for the best students, more state universities appear to be doing so now, even if it means they have to lower out-of-state tuition. We have seen this happen in Wisconsin, where it was a hot-button issue during the last election season.

**Demystifying the first-year student:** It's time to figure out how to work with the freshmen we have rather than the ones in our admissions brochures, says a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by James M. Lang, titled "The Myth of First-Year Enlightenment." Specifically, we should accept the fact that, instead of dedicating themselves to intellectual development, freshmen spend most of their time "figuring out how to handle life without parental restraints and support: how to deal with money; negotiate newfound freedoms with sex, drugs, and alcohol; and determine how much time to devote to studying, working, and playing."

**Intuitive photo map:** One new software technology that we thought you'd like to find out about is called ViewGenie. Thousands of current and prospective students at the University of Toronto use it to find their way around campus. Unlike static video tours, this one is interactive and allows students to focus on whatever they want to see. To take a look, go to <http://uoft.viewgenie.com/>. For more information, visit [www.viewgenie.com/](http://www.viewgenie.com/). ✓

# Looking at the Costs of Student Acquisition and Attrition

**Craig Heldman**

According to recent data from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the average per-student recruiting expenditure for four-year colleges and universities was just under \$714, making the cost to recruit just 3,000 students each year over \$2 million. However, as colleges and universities are facing more difficult financial times, recruitment budgets continue to shrink. While colleges and universities across the country are looking for ways to cut costs, more and more administrators are realizing just how much saving potential lies in retention.

Consider the effect of 15 percent of a freshman class of 3,000 dropping out after the first year. If yearly tuition is \$6,200 (the current average at a state institution), over the next three years, the institution will lose \$8.3 million in tuition revenue alone.

As the price and size of the school goes up, so does the amount of lost revenue by retention, which creates an interesting conundrum for more expensive private schools that could be losing up to \$36 million. Considering the average attrition rate at four-year institutions is 32 percent, more than double our estimate, this exercise clearly demonstrates what is at stake financially by ignoring retention concerns.

Student retention continues to be a hot topic in administrative offices on college and university campuses nationwide. Everyone recognizes they could be doing more to maintain student enrollment, but that's usually where the conversation ends. As a result (according to a 2004 ACT survey):

- Only 51.7 percent of campuses have identified an individual or business unit responsible for coordinating retention strategies.
- Only 47.2 percent of campuses have established an improvement goal for retention of students from the first to second year.

## Case Study: Tiffin University

*Tiffin University is a four-year independent institution in Ohio. Tiffin's 2,350 students include both traditional and adult learners. The university offers traditional and online classes. In 2007, Tiffin enrolled 308 freshmen.*

In an effort to increase retention rates, Tiffin University assessed past recruitment and enrollment efforts, identified the institution's four major roadblocks to student success (academic, financial, affiliation, satisfaction), and built a comprehensive retention strategy that thoroughly addresses each issue.

The first step in Tiffin's multitiered approach was to collect data from every available source (i.e., admissions office, financial aid office, bursar's office, and registration and records) on current and past students. This data was then used to build a predictive model and transferred into EMT Retain, a CRM tool. The institution was then able to utilize the data to send out personalized messages to students concerning attendance issues, extracurricular areas of interest, registration, and more.

Additionally, the data collection and analysis allowed for Tiffin's staff to identify and focus on those students who required additional one-on-one attention. Students identified as most at-risk meet regularly with coaches. Tiffin's coaches are available to assist students with many facets of adjusting to college life, including locating materials and finding places and people on campus, as well as offer support, encouragement, and positive reinforcement.

In 2002, Tiffin's one-year retention rate held fast at 51 percent. Five years later, after the multitiered retention plan was implemented, Tiffin's one-year retention rate has jumped to more than 63 percent. From a budget perspective, this materializes as millions of dollars of revenue saved.

The significant increase in Tiffin University's first-to-second year retention rates speaks volumes about the benefits of their comprehensive approach.

"Transitioning into college is very challenging, and Tiffin University has implemented a comprehensive intervention strategy that has increased our retention rates. Through our use of a multitiered approach combining the use of personal interaction and e-mail communications, we have seen more and more of our students succeed," said Annette Staunton, chief retention officer, Tiffin University.

Through careful planning, research, and now results, Tiffin has seen just how retention efforts can make a difference in the lives of students. ✓

### Why do students drop out?

A recent ACT survey of college and university administrators revealed student issues, rather than institutional factors, contributed most to attrition. Only two institutional factors were cited as significant: the level of financial aid available and the student fit with the institution.

➤ *continued on page 7*

- Only 33.1 percent of campuses have established a goal for improving degree completion.

An organized, systematic approach to reaching out to students is a logical solution, but few schools understand everything required to initiate an effective retention program.

## ▼ Acquisition and Attrition

from page 6

Of the student characteristics cited as contributing to attrition, respondents identified 13 factors as having the greatest impact on dropout rates. Among them were lack of motivation to succeed, inadequate financial resources, inadequate preparation for college, and poor study skills. Institutions must realize this and adjust their strategies accordingly by first figuring out what makes their schools at risk for attrition and then working with students on an individual level to assure their success.

### Tackling the challenge head-on

Addressing student issues in isolation will not help institutions succeed in their quest for higher retention rates. Schools must take an active role on several fronts. To truly solve the retention problem, schools must use a multipronged approach that includes assessment of the school, communication, and interaction with students.

In addition to first-year educational programs, academic advisory, and tutoring programs, schools must institute an organized, systematic method of reaching out to students, particularly those at risk of dropping out.

Institutions must ask themselves:

- What makes my school more likely to have unacceptable retention rates?
- How do we identify at-risk students?
- How do we keep students engaged and part of the overall campus community?
- What resources and services will increase the likelihood of success?
- And most importantly (because there is no one-size-fits-all plan), where do we begin?

### Conduct an assessment

An objective assessment of an institution's characteristics and constraints can help highlight internal challenges, such as residential capacity, housing requirements, course and major availability, class sizes, academic support, financial support,

personality fit, and other factors that foster student satisfaction and retention.

It's essential to examine a school's assets and potential shortcomings to develop positive remedies that make an immediate impact on students. Retention assessments allow institutional leaders to see their unique challenges and develop positive solutions to retain students. Computer models that use historical student data to predict future student behavior can help target a school's retention efforts more precisely.

### More and better student interaction

Addressing school and student challenges individually is crucial to a holistic retention solution. Relationship management and continuous, personalized communication with all students are vital to keeping student and school in contact.

Regular personal interaction with students is critical to customizing individual success strategies. Poor grades and low attendance are obvious indicators of vulnerability, but many other factors contribute to at-risk status, such as personality characteristics, poor organizational skills, homesickness, mental illness, learning disabilities, and poor social skills. These factors would be impossible to discover and correct without using a direct communication method.

In most cases, a continuing relationship between an advisor or counselor and the student is necessary to identify, understand, and ultimately resolve the student's individual challenges. Such advisors help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and determine both short- and long-term goals. With frequent collaboration, students are more likely to remain in school and obtain their desired degrees.

### A place for technology

Vastly more sophisticated and accessible communications technology is becoming invaluable in building and maintaining a successful communication strategy. Technology enables institutions to track institutional objectives, monitor individual student progress, streamline communica-

tions and administrative tasks, manage early alerts, and allow more time and availability for staff/student interaction. Technology also allows multiple offices and campuses to be integrated into one central strategy.

Web-based communication can elevate communication efforts across campus to target at-risk students. Institutions can streamline communications and administrative tasks with early alerts, giving campus staff and advisors more availability to interact with at-risk students.

### Customizing retention strategies

A multifaceted approach is vital to any retention program. First, each school's specific needs are different. Tactics that will work at one institution will not necessarily work at another, so administrators, faculty, and staff must have an array of methods available to them to maximize positive results. Second, the reasons for students leaving a college or university vary widely, so various methods are needed to give students more personalized outcomes.

### The bottom line

Student attrition is a significant and growing concern at higher education institutions nationwide. The College Board estimates that schools lose thousands annually for each student who leaves the institution.

While the financial impact of attrition is alarming, its effect on a school's reputation and the student experience is also considerable. Losing students before graduation is a trend that cannot improve without direct, positive action on the part of administrators, faculty, and staff.

It's time for schools to address student attrition as nothing less than a crisis. The bottom line is, you can't afford not to.

*Craig Heldman is president of Hobsons U.S., a company that helps colleges and universities elevate their enrollment and retention strategies. ✓*

# Are We Prepared for “Seismic Demographic Shifts”?

Linda H. Fitzhugh

While admissions administrators pore over the latest Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) research report titled *Knocking at the College Door*, we also assess if we are adequately prepared to open the proverbial door. Divided into two main components, the report provides projections of high school graduates by state and by race/ethnicity.

For some, in what the WICHE report deems as the *explosive growth* states (Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, Texas, and Utah), the report portends the best of times in terms of high school graduates. For colleagues in *dwindling production* states (Kansas, Louisiana, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming), the report is a harbinger of drastically smaller high school graduate numbers. Remaining states fall into one of the remaining four categories: slowing or stable production and manageable or rapid expansion.

## Declines in some populations, increases in others

WICHE’s voluminous projections for public school graduates by 2014–15 stand clear and uncomplicated. While the overall number of U.S. public school graduates will decline after 2007–2008, there will be “seismic demographic shifts” within those numbers. Almost by the same trend that the white, non-Hispanic high school graduate populations will decline, the number of Hispanic high school graduates will increase.

The good news/bad news is that the Hispanic growth will be disproportionately represented in southern and western regions, leaving the Northeast and upper Midwest with actual declining numbers of high school graduates. A similar flip-flop will occur as the number of black, non-Hispanic high school graduates slows considerably while the Asian/Pacific Islanders number will grow at about four times that rate.

Regardless of an institution’s locale, most have already experienced sea

changes in the strategies used to recruit, admit, and retain students. As the doors swing open wide, who will be standing there? They will be students who have not been knocking because their socioeconomic status could not provide them with the essential cultural capital to access higher education.

## From attracting out-of-state students to attracting non-white students

What we once struggled with as the real or perceived gap in attracting out-of-state students now pales in comparison to the challenges of successfully recruiting non-white students. And if there is to be new enrollment growth at our institutions, virtually all of it will come from increasingly diverse population groups.

Some schools in slowing states have wisely taken advantage of Millennial parents’ indefatigable quest to place their offspring in well-branded schools that affirm both the child and parent’s success. While pricey, some institutions have found branding campaigns worth the investment in attracting students to migrate from their home state. For enrolled students, comprehensive communication about campus activities has helped fill the need-to-know gap for parents whose worlds turn on every detail of their children’s experiences.

Northeast and Midwest institutions already must recruit from the South and more western states to backfill their declining high school graduate pool. Astute admissions personnel have out-of-state strategies in place, including admissions counselors actually residing in the states that have more high school graduates. Tuition add-ons for out-of-state students have been reduced or eliminated to make distance less of a factor in the college decision.

## Understanding Hispanic culture

Most of us are well into the process of learning the importance of *familia*, a central concept in understanding Hispanic culture. When we reach out to Hispanic students, we must also build relationships with the family that may include several

generations, often living in the same household. Knowing that education is highly valued in the Hispanic culture makes our job easier, but we must keep in mind that this grouping historically has had a lower rate of college attendance than white, non-Hispanics.

That’s why we speak of the positive outcomes for college graduates and remind prospective students and their families that the earnings premium for four-year college graduates is 60 percent greater than for those who only finish high school.

At LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas, our director of alumni and parent relations is Hispanic. She often reminds the campus community that even within the Hispanic population, there is much diversity. Sensitivity to whether your student is Chicano, Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, or South or Central American will be appreciated.

Students will be attracted to a campus where they see faculty and staff who share similar ethnicity and culture. They want to see people who look like them within the campus community.

Recently, I learned of an institution’s president who requires deans and vice presidents to bring in at least one minority candidate for every open position for employment. Strategies like this will put teeth to the lip service that is sometimes given to hiring practices.

## Two questions

Several years ago, Noel-Levitz produced a white paper focused on the changing demographics of America’s high school graduates. The paper asked two pertinent questions that still should resonate on our campuses and in our boardrooms:

- “What if these large numbers of prospective students *do not* enroll in college? What opportunities will be lost—for the individuals, institutions, and societies?”
- What if they *do* enroll? Are we ready to accept them and help them succeed to graduation?”

➤ *continued on page 4*