

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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CHALLENGING ASPIRATIONAL RETENTION STRATEGIES: LET'S FOCUS ON THE STU- DENTS WE HAVE

John W. Dysart
President
The Dysart Group, Inc.

Retention is an important topic for every college and university. It is a subject we have been actively talking about for nearly fifty years. Committees have been formed, data has been collected and surveys have been conducted. Meetings have been held, papers have been written, strategic initiatives undertaken and personnel have been hired to specifically focus on retention. Yet, for many colleges and universities, little or no progress has been made and it can be extremely frustrating.

Some administrators and leaders are now seeking retention solutions by trying to change the profile of newly enrolled students. Many enrollment managers are charged with the dictate to recruit higher ability students, students with greater ability to pay and students from families with more experience in higher education. Well, we would all like that!

It would be unfortunate, however, for institutions to lose sight of mission. It would be a shame if such an approach to retention lessened national student access to higher education. For some schools, it is time to embrace their historic student population and find better ways to enhance persistence

and graduation rates for these students. It is by no means an easy task and might require brand new thinking on the topic and a willingness to try innovative approaches.

Colleges and universities who recruit and enroll at-risk students have an obligation to take extraordinary measures to help these students succeed.

MARS HILL COLLEGE CONTINUES RECORD GROWTH

John W. Dysart
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Mars Hill College in Mars Hill, North Carolina, posted a 34% increase in new student enrollments for Fall 2011. This success has continued into the new term with additional growth realized for Spring 2012.

The good news began with an increase in the size of the customer base. Students indicating an interest in enrolling at Mars Hill College grew by 21% for the January term compared to the same time last year

The aggressive communication strategies utilized the previous cycle were applied to the new inquiries. Early notification of scholarship eligibility, systematic communication and an emphasis on campus visits resulted in a 27% increase in applications.

Communication with applicants for admission was even more focused. Admission counselors used the telephone, text messaging, email and social media to encourage prospective students to learn more about MHC. Students responded in a positive

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MARS HILL COLLEGE CONTINUED:

manner as the number of applicants accepted for admission jumped by 54% over the previous year.

The real evidence of an effective strategy shows in the number of newly enrolled students. The College realized a 29% increase in new students and enrolled the largest Spring class in literally decades.

Recruitment increases continue. The data for upcoming Fall 2012 is very encouraging. Applications for admission are up another 30% compared to the record numbers posted last year. Craig Goforth, Assistant Vice President of Enrollment Management, is leading the enrollment team to enroll even more students. He is working to actively educate every prospective student on the advantages of a Mars Hill College experience. In this difficult economy, prospective students and their families must be convinced of the value of a private college experience despite higher costs when compared to public institutions. At Mars Hill College, communicating value is paying dividends.

HEALTH SCIENCES COLLEGE SETS NEW RECORD FOR ENROLLMENT

John W. Dysart
President
The Dysart Group, Inc.

When Dr. Martha Shouldis took over the presidency at Saint Joseph College in Bridgeport, Connecticut, one of her goals was to increase enrollment. In short order, she has achieved that objective.

A new recruitment model was implemented last year that resulted in increases in both applications and acceptances for Fall 2011. The number of newly enrolled students grew by 26% compared to the previous year. Enrollment growth continued through the most recent term. New student headcount is up by 38% for Spring 2012 compared to the same term last year. The total number of students enrolled at SVC has increased by 22% while total credits are up 20%.

According to Dr. Joanne Wolfertz, Vice President/Dean,

the outlook for Fall 2012 is very good. Significant increases in applicants for admission have already allowed for greater selectivity for Fall 2012.

EXPECTATIONS: THE PRESIDENT/CHIEF ENROLLMENT OFFICER RELATIONSHIP

Dr. Scott Miller
President
Bethany College

Marylouise Fennell, RSM
Principal
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We've written before on the critical topic of transformational presidential leadership. This column is devoted to the relationship between the college president and the chief enrollment officer. Because enrollment is the single most important revenue "driver" at most colleges and universities, the strength of that relationship is critical to institutional success.

In dozens of consultancies at diverse institutions, we've found that all have at least one thing in common: a proactive president who demonstrates a commitment to a culture of recruitment and retention.

Keeping Your Eye on the Prize

Urgency and continuity of focus are critical, observes Dr. Joe Pace, a nationally-known specialist in student retention and chairman of the board, PX2 Youth and Higher Education, who also serves as program director, facilitator and speaker for The Pacific Institute in Seattle, WA.

"What we almost always find when we are retained by institutions with slipping recruitment and retention is that the little things that make all the difference to students have slipped through the cracks," says Pace. He adds, "Just a small lapse in attention to student needs and expectations can result in a critical slippage in students."

The President

Dr. James L. Fisher, noted author and President-emeritus of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education,

EXPECTATIONS: THE PRESIDENT/ CHIEF ENROLLMENT OFFICER RE- LATIONSHIP CONTINUED:

states, "A transformational leader can be likened to the captain of a ship; others may steer the ship, but the captain must first chart a clear vision."

With changing student and family demographics, eroding financial support from federal and state governments and competition becoming ever more intense, visible and entrepreneurial presidential leadership is essential.

The visible CEO challenges the status quo, setting priorities while engaging the community and openly linking enrollment to the financial health of the college. He or she leads the desired profile, establishes an organizational structure to facilitate productivity, frames issues and policy and pilots institutional strategies and approaches.

Moreover, the transformative president must demonstrate a keen understanding that buildings, grounds and technology are an integral component of strategic success. This is especially true of health, fitness and athletic-related facilities and amenities: NCAA statistics point out that student participation in varsity and junior varsity teams nationally continues to rise at the rate of about 2 percent a year. As our colleague Dr. Walter M. Bortz III, former president of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, states, "Ensuring that the campus has curb appeal and is filled with first-class technology, faculty and facilities helps to guarantee the necessary enrollment to keep the enterprise operational and growing."

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Championing Enrollment

The president must continually champion enrollment, engaging key leaders in the process while allocating the resources needed to get the job done. Although vision is vital, attention to detail is equally critical. Progress requires a business approach and demands weekly reports from the chief enrollment officer. These should include:

An overall report that includes, but is not limited to, contacts, inquiries, applications, completed applications, acceptances and confirmations;

Individual reports for counselors and call-center personnel that include volume of contacts and conversions, and

Financial aid reports including, but not limited to, pre-awards, awards and acceptances. These three areas are the most crucial, and an effective enrollment president always has command of this information.

EXPECTATIONS: THE PRESIDENT/ CHIEF ENROLLMENT OFFICER RELATIONSHIP CONTINUED:

The Chief Enrollment Officer

The role of this key individual has become increasingly complex, states Bethany College vice president Sven de Jong, who has successfully implemented a model recommended by The Dysart Group in 2007. After years of “roller coaster” results at Bethany, the model has resulted in three of the College’s largest classes in the past 30 years and the largest headcount in 35 years in 2011. This while also progressively improving the profile of each incoming class.

“Increased competition means that chief enrollment officers must be continuously scanning the enrollment landscape, seeking new approaches and proactively recommending strategic responses to new trends,” he adds. “New trends are pointing to an approach in which enrollment resources must be simultaneously directed not only toward bringing in next year’s class, but also focusing on high school sophomores and juniors, increasing numbers of transfer students and connecting with them in ways and on platforms prospective students expect in today’s highly technologically integrated society.”

Depending on the complexity of the organization, this key campus leader might carry any one of a variety of titles; those of vice president, dean or executive director are among the most common. de Jong is Vice President for Institutional Advancement, with all external affairs (including enrollment and fund raising) falling under his supervision. A Director of Enrollment reports directly to him. “It is imperative that he or she be an active institutional spokesperson, a team builder and an accomplished motivator all while holding the staff accountable,” de Jong noted.

Presidential expectations for this individual include the setting of realistic goals and energetic, ongoing participation in website and e-marketing (including social media), print media, direct mail and the college’s first-year program. Further, he or she must understand the vital role of research in analyzing trends, the pivotal role of marketing, the volatile world of admissions and financial aid, the value of student orientation and the necessity of retention and advising. The enrollment manager must also demonstrate the “people” skills to train and motivate the enrollment counselors who work in the

field and those who staff the call center.

Finally, the effective chief enrollment officer must operate from a bottom-line perspective, focusing on the objectives of each component reporting to this area. Combining these big-picture and detail-oriented factors leads to a successful outcome, with the result exceeding the sum of its parts.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is President of the College and M.M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College in West Virginia. Now in his third college presidency, he recently started his 22nd year as a college CEO.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Hyatt-Fennell, a Higher Education Search Firm.

They have collaborated on nine books, including “President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education” (2009) and “Presidential Perspectives: Economic Prosperity in the Next Decade” (2011). Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.

STUDENT RETENTION: LEARNING FROM BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

*Dr. Abraham S. Fischler
President Emeritus and University Professor
Nova Southeastern University*

During my long career in higher education and dealing with student retention, I have been amazed by the myriad factors that influence persistence. Dozens of research projects have been conducted over the years on retention and we now know several steps that can be taken to positively influence grade level progression and graduation rates. The challenge for colleges and universities is that many of these steps can be difficult to implement, arduous to maintain, politically complicated and expensive.

Curricular updates and advancements can be helpful, but the process for securing such change can take a very long time. Lengthy committee discussions, compromise and differing opinions will be part of the process and these as-

STUDENT RETENTION: LEARNING FROM BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY CONTINUED:

pects can result in “watered-down” reforms.

Early warning systems definitely work, but require proactive participation by diverse campus constituent groups. Sometimes college and university leaders are able to secure full participation, yet often wide-scale implementation is just not possible.

Retention rates can be improved by making material increases in the academic preparation levels of newly enrolled students. Recruiting and matriculating students with higher standardized test scores and higher high school grade point averages can increase graduation rates. Raising standards, however, is not a realistic option for many institutions. Even when there are opportunities to raise standards, other campus improvements also might be necessary to ensure that higher ability students actually enroll.

Higher educational professionals should consider looking to business and industry to find new ways to approach the issue. I learned that dropout rates could be reduced if students took a course in *Success*. Not the traditional “foundations” course, or typical freshmen year experience course, but an educational experience that emphasizes achievement of goals, teaches more practical life skills and helps students stay motivated. In conjunction with The Pacific Institute, Dr. Joe Pace, Chairman of the Performance Institute, created a course lesson based on proven research using techniques and tactics that have been successful in the business world. The curriculum, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, has been implemented at a number of colleges and universities throughout the United States with impressive results.

We have all encountered students who have never been successful, and/or have not had the benefit of growing up with appropriate mentors and thus lack the vision or experience to succeed. Even students coming from second and third generation college families, and with better than average academic preparation can struggle. This can be countered by training students on how to dig deep down to find a picture or vision that motivates them.

One of the things we found in both research and in practical application is that people who stay in school have a vision in their mind about a specific outcome; they have a

picture that’s very sensory rich. They can touch it, taste it. If a student is trained properly, he/she can tap this information and then use it for motivation and to overcome obstacles. The impact happens one student at a time, but by influencing one student at a time, your retention rate can improve 10 percent over the course of one year.

I recall one adult woman, who worked at the college where she graduated and said she thought about dropping out at least 40 times, but she kept going because of her 3-year-old son, Quentin. The college was able to help her use Quentin as her vision or picture for persisting. This particular college is always looking to find ways of helping their students lock on to a vision, a picture, something in which they take great pride. In this case, it was the student’s son. But visions for motivation can be found in many places for different students. Perhaps it is the dream of attending graduate school, or landing the dream job or making more money or just making parents proud.

Some students may have a clear initial goal, but drop out because their vision isn’t strong enough to take them through the rough spots over a longer period of time. The vision of a new car, for example, might not be enough. Others drop out because the classes aren’t what they expected. The student sees a glossy view book and an exciting web site and the admission counselor helps him or her focus on how the university can meet his or her specific needs. But no one has bothered to share how the university has been marketed with the faculty and other staff and this can create the classic retention risk where expectations do not meet reality. Incorporating those aspects of the institution that attract students into the general educational experience does not mean lowering grading scales, or changing course outlines, but it might mean being aware of what initially excites students about attending college and then taking some proactive measures to make sure the reasons for the initial attraction are reinforced as often as possible.

Students are usually looking for a lifestyle change, and have an image in mind of a better life for themselves. Some faculty and staff think it’s just about the academic programming, the major or impressive faculty credentials. Students may not care about that. They have a dream in their minds, so the more the campus personnel know about the vision or picture, the more they can target that dream.

Colleges and universities have been successfully using this approach to improve class attendance. The simple task of effectively encouraging students to get up and go to class eve-

STUDENT RETENTION: LEARNING FROM BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY CONTINUED:

ry day requires similar motivation. Colleges and universities can use the same visioning techniques. Constantly remind students of why they enrolled in the first place. Reinforce in the classroom experience why the information provided is important and how it is useful. When possible, help students connect the day-to-day classroom experience with their educational goal. This approach can enable students to consistently overcome obstacles.

There are some very simple things colleges can do to reinforce a student's motivation:

- Some institutions take a picture of students in cap and gown on the first day of class or during orientation. The pictures can be given to students to put on their notebooks or on their residence hall room bulletin boards.
- Others make a tapestry with the names of everyone in the entering class.
- Some give out T-shirts with student names on the back.

These simple activities can help students create a new social group built around a common goal and success.

This approach to retention is based on research that has been around for 50 or 60 years and places it in a user-friendly context with practical applications. Many colleges and universities have realized significant improvements in retention outcomes by incorporating programs such as *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career* into their foundations or freshmen year experience course.

The impact of the course for students can be supplemented by providing faculty and staff with available training. Faculty and staff who are student-orientated and have positive expectations of students make a big difference in a college's retention rate. Faculty is critically important because many students spend more time with them than other campus personnel. Coaches are also very influential for the same reason.

What I have discovered is that the approach described above can be greatly enhanced if, in addition to students learning these skills, faculty, staff and administrators understand the basic concepts and apply them when interacting with students. Everyone working on campus should strive

to be models, mentors and monitors.

I advocate becoming an "edupreneur"- half educator, half entrepreneur- in order to understand both the business and educational sides of higher education. Sometimes the administrative side does not understand or fully appreciate the educator side and the reverse is as often true. I have been involved in training sessions that have helped the campus community to better understand the student perspective. The training involves exercises designed to allow faculty and staff to examine student encounters differently, while encouraging visualizing various situations from the perspective of students in order to react in ways that will enhance the student experience.

If you take nothing else away from reading this article, at least understand the dictate that "*attention equals retention.*" Research has consistently shown that paying exceptional attention to students over a period of time will result in improved retention. One could spend three months with 30 students and every day ask them how they're doing, smile at them, and pay extraordinary attention to them. Over the three-month period, you would see major improvement in retention with this group. The effect multiplies when faculty and staff team up and expand the group of students benefiting from the attention. There's sort of a law of synergy or a law of physics that comes into effect. I have seen that if I can get 10 out of 20 campus workers to say, "You know, this really makes a lot of sense," it's absolutely amazing how you begin to see it reflected in the way they interact with students every day.

Teachers, meaning all faculty and staff on campus, need an intelligent heart: knowledge about their subject and the heart to know how to reach students. Often staff members just want to focus on their every day job and are not concerned with being student focused and customer-oriented. It's important, however, to achieve the balance of being part of an educational institution and being someone dedicated to student success.

Once staff and faculty have been motivated, how can colleges and universities foster continuation of student-focused attention? Well, it will not work with just a single training session. Follow up training is important and at least annual reinforcement is necessary. Chief administrators must both advocate for and demonstrate commitment to the approach. Bring in experts from off-campus to reignite interest.

Some might think this stuff is too touchy-feely, but it's not. Research shows that in order to foster change of any type, to create lasting, meaningful synapses in the brain, there must be emotion involved. This emotion is sometimes mistaken as

STUDENT RETENTION: LEARNING FROM BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY CONTINUED:

touchy-feely. Behaviors do not change unless there is a synapse in the brain that is sustained by some form of emotion causing motivation. That motivation can be value or threat, but the value works much better and fosters better results. In a democratic society where every vote counts, it is imperative that we provide an adequate education to every person to help them reach their full potential. We cannot afford to hide behind our excuses for not succeeding with every child, regardless of their background.

For more information on "Thought Patterns for a Successful Career," contact Mark Panciera, President of Performance Institute, at (954) 602-9893 or mpanciera@performanceinst.com.

John W. Dysart
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