

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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INEXPENSIVE, REALISTIC & SIMPLE INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE RETENTION

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Many discussions, meetings, planning sessions and research projects have been conducted at colleges and universities regarding retention. For the hundreds of small, private colleges and universities that enroll large numbers of "at-risk" students, proactive retention activities are extremely important. Retention is a topic, however, that is much discussed but rarely *really* addressed.

At many institutions, the focus has been on trying to recruit "better" students. Colleges have been trying to enroll students with greater ability to pay and higher test scores and grade point averages for years. While there is nothing wrong with seeking to enhance the student profile, in the meantime it is more important to begin conducting business in a manner that recognizes the characteristics of the students actually enrolled.

Leaders can do a number of things to increase retention rates. These ideas do not require massive investments, major curricular change or significant political risk. Many

of the initiatives discussed in this article have been implemented at Freed-Hardeman University in Tennessee with positive results. The most recent retention rates from fall to spring have been calculated at FHU and the numbers are encouraging. Rates for both newly enrolled freshmen and other students are at the highest levels in history. The University was able to retain 93% of its freshmen this term and the retention for other students was better than 95%. Keep in mind that FHU enrolls a large number of academically at-risk students and that 43% of the students are eligible for Federal Pell Grants. Following are some recommended tactics that have proven to be beneficial at small colleges and universities:

- **Introduce a more realistic financial aid packaging strategy.**

Colleges and universities enrolling large numbers of high-need students need to recognize this fact and design their award and discounting policies accordingly. You are not likely to be able to maintain a 30% discount rate when half of your students are eligible for Federal Pell Grants. Base your packaging policy and discount target on the population you currently enroll rather than basing the award policy on some arbitrary discount rate or on the practices of competing or peer institutions.

- Realistic packaging reduces the number of students forced to withdraw due to outstanding balances.

- Realistic packaging reduces the amount of funds outstanding in accounts receivable each term.

- In most cases, you are better served with a higher discount rate and larger enroll-

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INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE RETENTION CONTINUED:

ment than a lower discount rate with empty seats and high receivables.

- **The timing of financial aid packages can also make a difference.**

Early packaging for both new and returning students allows sufficient time for financial planning on the part of students and their families. Students packaged over the summer, for example, have little time for financial planning and this often translates into attrition.

- **Check outstanding balances four weeks before the end of each term.**

The Business Office should run a list of students with outstanding balances four weeks before the end of each term. The list should be reviewed with the Director of Financial Aid and students who are otherwise academically successful and good citizens should be contacted by telephone or in person. On a case-by-case basis, consider creative payment options and even the possibility of covering outstanding balances with institutional aid.

- **Review the grades for general education courses at the end of every term and plan academic support services and study hall options accordingly.**

It should be easy to identify the courses (or particular sections of courses) in which students are struggling. While you may not be able to change the curriculum, faculty or classroom experience, you can offer specific academic support and approach students enrolled in “at-risk” courses to encourage them to take advantage of available assistance.

- **Send a representative from your academic support area to sit in on classes with high rates of students earning “D” or “F” grades or where there are high withdrawal rates.**

Sometimes, sitting in on a few classes of a particular course where students struggle to succeed can inform academic support tactics. Additionally, programs such as the Supplemental Instruction program, an academic support model first instituted at The University of Missouri-Kansas City by Dr. Deanna Martin, is a program where students receive not only academic support, but assistance in becoming independent learners and can be targeted at such courses.

Data has proven that regular attendance at the sessions will help raise grade point averages.

- **Schedule meetings with departmental deans every term.**

These meetings can be used to provide feedback to deans on student success rates as a function of major, course and section. The deans can also participate in discussions to determine study groups and the focus of academic support offerings.

- **Have the chief academic officer keep numeric counts of the number of students in each major each term.**

Keeping counts might encourage accountability for academic success in the classroom.

- **Require an “academic” orientation for new student athletes.**

Many schools have separate orientation programs for new student athletes because athletic events can often keep student athletes from attending new student orientation. This will allow the dissemination of information regarding institutional policies and resources that might otherwise not be shared. Consider shifting the focus of these programs to educate students on study skills and academic support services.

- **Initiate a formal referral program for coaches.**

While establishing a formal process for faculty to make referrals for academic support, a similar process should be established for coaches. Referrals should be made for students considered to be at risk academically, or socially, as well as for students unlikely to make teams or unlikely to play.

- **Hire a group of full-time professionals to advise new students and students who are undecided on a major.**

A number of advantages result from hiring full-time advisors:

- It is easier to hold such staff members accountable for activities and outcomes.
- These individuals will have much more time to dedicate to advising and retention support services.
- Opportunities emerge to engage these individuals in important tasks in addition to advising.

INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE RETENTION CONTINUED:

- **Train academic advisors on the basics of Satisfactory Academic Progress rules for financial aid.**

More and more students are running into difficulties with SAP as the government has strengthened the rules. Students are deciding to leave schools due to short-comings for both the quantitative and qualitative measures. Transfer students, in particular, often run into situations where eligibility limits are being met before sufficient credits are earned for graduation. Advisors should be better equipped to educate students about the SAP implications for scheduling decisions.

Some schools have gone so far as to require the financial aid office to sign off on scheduling changes to ensure that students are made aware of any impact of schedule changes on compliance with Satisfactory Academic Progress measures and financial aid program aggregate award limits.

- **Consider locating the advising center near the financial aid office.**

At FHU, leaders have discovered that proximity breeds natural cross-training between the two offices and facilitates easy referrals.

- **Have advisors make personal calls and schedule one-on-one meetings with students earning "D" or "F" grades at midterm.**

The key here is not to just attempt academic intervention, but to ensure personal contact. This means that all referrals are tracked and follow-up continues with the students until personal meetings have been completed for all students on the referral list.

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- **Inform parents of academic, social and athletic referrals.**

Engage the parents as partners in the intervention process. Rework your approach to FERPA waivers to accommodate this practice. Inform parents at registration events of the academic supports available for their children, the cost and the process of accessing these supports.

- **Schedule a private session with parents at Orientation to discuss the family's role in retention.**

The first inclination for parents when speaking with children in social, academic, financial or athletic distress is to bring them home. Take the opportunity at orientation to educate parents on how to work with administrators and faculty to encourage persistence. Consider the creation of checklists or a newsletter to facilitate positive parental support.

- **Advisors should have a telephone conversation with every student who misses a pre registration deadline.**

INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE RETENTION CONTINUED:

This sounds like a simple solution and many administrators believe this is already being done at their institutions, but there is a big difference between an attempted contact and a completed contact. The key here is to track the contact rates. Accountability for those responsible for contacting the students can be accomplished with shared documents with input from callers relating date of contact and documentation of student response.

- **Encourage new students to establish goals during their “freshman experience” course.**

At Freed-Hardeman University, students are required to write their short-term and long term goals outlining their financial, academic, social and spiritual goals.

These goals can be shared with academic advisors. As part of each advising session, advisors can explain to students how each course supports their long-term and short-term goals. Advisors should be able to explain to each student, each term how each course contributes to their major and how each course is useful for their career goals.

This will require input and coordination with the faculty. Deans and faculty members should be well equipped to explain the importance of each course offering to the advisors.

Proactive reinforcement of how courses help students to achieve their goals is extremely important. It is easy for students to lose sight of their overall purpose in enrollment at the institution. Proactive, positive reinforcement every term can encourage persistence.

- **Dissuade students from academically inappropriate majors.**

Advisors can help students immediately by having frank discussions about the likelihood of academic success in particular majors, and even courses. For example, it may not make sense for students to pursue a major in nursing when their high school transcripts indicate lack of success in science courses. Even if students still want to pursue risky majors, the conversation at least creates the possibility for an academic support plan of action to help the student succeed in a particular major.

- **Fully integrate career counseling into academic advising.**

The advisors should work closely with career services to assist students in creating schedules that are in line with career ob-

jectives.

- **Encourage participation in co-curricular activities as part of the advising process.**

Advisors have unique access to academic credentials, admission applications and essays so they are in a position to recommend participation in clubs and organizations on campus that may be of interest to their students. Obviously, participation in activities outside of the classroom is generally good for retention. Some colleges and universities even require student attendance at a minimum number of campus and community events.

- **Encourage academic advisors to attend campus community events.**

Participation and attendance at events on campus allow for the opportunity for advisors to interact with students outside the official advising function. Leaders at Freed-Hardeman University have found that this strengthens relationships and facilitates communication between the advisors and students.

- **Conduct a comprehensive review of academic credit policies for majors, graduation, transfer credits, AP courses and electives.**

Credit policies can influence both recruitment and retention.

- A recent article in The Washington Post speculated that the decision by Dartmouth College to discontinue offering credit for AP courses may have contributed to a 14% drop in applications for admission.

- It is hard to defend the number of institutions who force students to retake courses they have already completed successfully at other accredited colleges and universities.

- Excessive credit requirements for graduation can place students in a position where financial aid resources are depleted before graduation requirements are met. A review of graduation credit requirements at Freed-Hardeman University resulted in a reduction of required credits from 132 to 126. The implications for this reduction are significant.

- Harsh transfer credit policies can force students to take longer to graduate. This has serious implications for levels of indebtedness, not to mention lost career earnings.

- Excessive credit requirements for majors limit the ability of students to take courses outside of the intended major and jeopardize a well-rounded college experience.

INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE RETENTION CONTINUED:

- **Utilize the National Student Clearinghouse to determine where your students enroll after departing your institution.**

Colleges and universities are able to access the StudentTracker function of the Clearinghouse to find out where their students enroll and if their students enroll elsewhere. The National Student Clearinghouse has access to enrollment information at nearly all of the post-secondary institutions in the country.

- Finding out where your students enroll might inform retention issues.

- Discovering students who leave your institution but do not enroll elsewhere demonstrates the importance of your retention practices.

Work with vendors to identify technology that will make your retention activities efficient.

There are a number of companies offering technology to better track students. Starfish Retention Solutions and Pharos Resources are just two. You can find out more by visiting their websites at www.starfishsolutions.com or www.pharosresources.com.

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES: THE ENROLLMENT-DRIVEN BUSINESS MODEL AND CULTURE

Dr. Scott Miller
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Reports abound of colleges and universities grappling with the realities of changing demographics, resulting in steep enrollment declines. Nationwide, college enrollment fell about 2 percent in 2012-2013; the number of new high school graduates peaked in 2011 and is not projected to reach a new high until 2024, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Successful presidents are fully engaged in the student enrollment process, driving a business paradigm and culture focusing on recruitment and retention while recognizing that students spend the bulk of their time doing things other than studying. Therefore, effective institutions aren't just focused on what happens during the 18 (or so) hours a student is in the classroom, but rather, on the overall learning experience.

Our long-time colleague, E. Gordon Gee, back for his second tenure as president of West Virginia University, and a veteran CEO of both private and public universities, often speaks of the importance of a "168-hour partnership" (the number of hours in a week) between institutions and students. Gee has a long history of inspiring the model we suggest.

Further, we recommend the following:

Leading the Discussion: The president should make student recruitment and retention a visible priority at all levels of the institution. Even with a clear, focused vision presidents cannot hope to effectively implement their partnership philosophy without ownership from key stakeholders.

Executing Seamless Processes: The president must be involved in defining the process and approving goals for the recruitment staff, as well as committing resources to support the program. Processes must address efficiency, communications, personal contact and attention. Further, the president is often instrumental in breaking down barriers among the admissions, financial aid and business/finance offices.

Involvement in Staffing: Most successful presidents prefer to play an instrumental role in hiring all enrollment management personnel, insisting on a staff with a bottom-line, results orientation and sales philosophy. In addition, CEO's must ensure that all key stakeholders are on board with consistent core messages and talking points.

Maintaining High Visibility: The president must remain active and highly visible in the enrollment management office and elsewhere. S/he is the face of the institution to key stakeholders. Effective presidents display a frequent and personal presence, not only at the enrollment office itself, but also by hosting informal recruiting visits in the president's office, cafeteria and other locations.

Speak Persuasively and Often: By doing so, the president

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To take advantage of registration discounts, register as part of a campus team, and before the early-bird deadline of **March 31, 2014**.

■ **For Hotel Accommodations, [click here](#)**

All events will be held in the Northbrook Ballroom at the Renaissance Chicago North Shore Hotel. To take advantage of the special conference rate, make reservations before **April 1, 2014**.

■ **For a preliminary Working Agenda, [click here](#)**

This is a working document so we invite you to check this page periodically for new information.

PANELS, POSTERS AND DISCUSSIONS

Positively Impacting College Success for Low-income/1st Generation Students

- Sharing Strategies To Retain Students
- Intentional Learning Approaches in and Beyond the Classroom
- Measuring and Strengthening Skills for Student Success
- Shifting the Culture of Academe
- Student Voices: Recent Alums and Students Discuss Factors Essential for Reaching Graduation
- YWM Presidents Discuss Mission/Money/Institutional Success
- Educational Funders Discuss Priorities and Partnering
- Roundtable Discussions for Those with Similar Jobs
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CONFIRMED INVITED GUESTS

- **Kim Cook**, Executive Director, National College Access Network
- **Greg Darnieder**, Senior Advisor to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan on the College Access Initiative
- **Robert Kelchen**, Assistant Professor of Higher Education, Seton Hall University; Methodologist, Washington Monthly college rankings;
- **Tom Mortenson**, Higher Education Policy Analyst, Postsecondary Education OPPORTUNITY; Senior Scholar, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education
- **Sheri Ranis**, Strategy Director, Lumina Foundation for Education
- **Chera Reid**, Program Officer, The Kresge Foundation
- **Vincent Tinto**, Distinguished University Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University

For more information, contact us at conference@yeswemustcoalition.org.

The Yes We Must Coalition strives to increase degree attainment of low-income students by promoting the work of small, independent, not-for-profit colleges and universities committed to this purpose.

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES CONTINUED:

can provide inspirational leadership to enhance the campus experience. Some colleagues take it a step further, personally calling top recruitment candidates. One veteran president of an NCAA Division III college coordinates campus visits with athletic recruiters so that top prospects benefit from a well-orchestrated visit with the president's office. Another takes a list of top prospective students and personally cultivates them. Finally, presidents should actively use social media to communicate with students.

Use Objective External Consultants: We recommend the use of external consultants to recruit key staff, to effect transformational change and to periodically evaluate progress. One experienced president tells us that he brings in The Dysart Group once a quarter to assess progress; after the conclusion of the recruitment cycle, bottom-line results from the previous year are evaluated.

No one ever said it would be easy; however, a few sustained hours of the president's time focused upon enrollment and retention each week can, over time, produce a significant impact. Presidential priority in this key area can energize faculty and staff to do the same.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is President and M.M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College. He was previously President of Wesley College and Lincoln Memorial University. He is Chair of the Board of Directors of Academic Search, Inc.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Hyatt Fennell, a higher education search firm.

They have collaborated on 11 books, including "President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education" (Volumes I-III) and "Presidential Perspectives" (Volumes I-VIII). They also edit the popular higher education thought series "Presidential Perspectives" (Aramark), now in its eighth year (www.presidentialperspectives.org).

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