ENROLLMENT MANAGER

How to Increase Student Retention by Matching Undergraduates with Programs They're Likely to Finish

Dr. Katelyn Sanders
Director of Admission
& Alumni Affairs
Bernard J Dunn School of Pharmacy
Shenandoah University

Dr. Scott D. Miller
President
Virginia Wesleyan University

The rate of college dropouts is on the rise, which is creating serious problems for students, learning institutions, and the economy.

How Bad Is the Issue?

According to a recent ThinkImpact report, the overall dropout rate for undergraduate college students is 40 percent, and the rates for non-white students are even higher.

Who drops out? It's not just freshmen who end up changing their minds. An analysis of more than 50 higher education institutions by Civitas Learning found that 20 percent of students who drop out before graduating had 75 percent of the credits they needed for their degree, and 10 percent of them had 90 percent of their credits.

In fact, over 36 million adults in the U.S. have earned college credits but not completed their degrees. These individuals are projected to earn $21,000 less than college graduates, and over time they are estimated to earn 35 percent less per year. As a result, students who leave college before they earn their degree will have an even harder time repaying their student loan debt — their reported default rate is 47 percent — which makes the overall debt crisis even more precarious.

Meanwhile, when colleges and universities invest money in recruiting and orienting students only to see many of those students leaving instead of succeeding, it results in lower matriculation rates, diminished institutional reputations, and fewer alumni who are likely or able to provide philanthropic support to the school in the future.

What Can We Do About It?

While the reasons students fail to earn their degrees are often beyond a school's control —financial hardship, medical concerns, and other life complications — one factor that schools do have a large amount of influence over is how students select a major. By improving the student-major matchmaking process, any higher education institution can increase its retention rate and help ensure that a

Inside this issue:

Finlandia University is the latest college to announce it is closing. The Hechinger Report reveals that 861 colleges and universities have closed since 2004.

Matching Under-graduates with Programs Continued:

greater number of students will be motivated to complete their studies, earn their degrees, and become alumni champions of their alma mater.

How can schools do a better job of matching students to programs they're likely to complete?

Discuss the large *and* small details of what makes a student tick.

If prospective students have a good idea of the type of career they'd like to pursue, it can be easier to connect them with a degree program that's currently required or in demand for that field. But when a student is undecided about their career prospects, it's worth exploring deeper questions about what kinds of projects interest them, what aspects of learning excite them, what they believe their strengths are, and what kind of problems they love to solve or what type of change they'd like to create in the world.

For example, a student who excels at STEM but doesn't necessarily feel drawn to an engineering career may instead be interested in becoming an Operations Manager, an Urban Planner, or even working in the arts, where their methodical approach to challenges might be exactly what a creative endeavor needs to succeed.

Set clear expectations of what the program looks *and* feels like.

Will the program a student is considering be heavy on textbook reading? Writing essays? Hands-on learning? Self-paced projects? Group work? Externships? Are the instructors highly communicative or largely hands-off? Are there points in the curriculum where the volume of classwork is especially high across multiple classes, which can cause high stress and lead to burnout?

Helping students visualize how their experience will progress during their years of study will give them a much clearer picture of what to expect. It also helps them identify potential stumbling blocks beforehand. That way they can either prepare for those hurdles in advance or even choose another program entirely, rather than finding themselves stuck in an insurmountable challenge midway through.

Be transparent about expected salaries in a student's chosen field.

Sometimes, the easiest way to clear a hurdle is to remind yourself just how close you are to the finish line — and since college graduates' earning potential tends to be significantly higher than non-graduates, this makes crossing that finish line even more important. Keep up to date on the average entry-level and mid-career salaries in the programs you offer, so students will know what to expect when they cross that finish line. Having that number on hand will also help them calculate how quickly they'll be able to repay any student loans, which can make a big difference between seeing a cloudy future and one with a clear light at the end of the student loan tunnel.

Likewise, if the salary expectations or hiring trends in certain fields are in a downturn, it's important to let prospective students know this so they can determine whether taking on student loan debt to earn a degree in a lower-paying field is still the choice they'd like to make. That said, the skills a student learns within a program are transferable to multiple career tracks, and being able to offer students alternative possibilities for where their degree could take them may help them feel more confident about pursuing the degree they've always dreamed of.

Establish robust feedback and mentoring processes.

Even students who love their programs may still encounter stumbling blocks academically, socially, financially, or personally. Having a trusted mentor or counselor they can speak with is vital for helping them

Matching Under-graduates with Programs Continued:

navigate the unexpected challenges that could otherwise derail them from their graduation pace.

Just as importantly, students must be able to provide feedback to the institution itself regarding what is and isn't working for them. Responsive institutions who work with their students to find new solutions to emerging problems will stand a much better chance of retaining those students and celebrating their successes with a degree in hand.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is President of Virginia Wesleyan University in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Dr. Katelyn "Katie" Sanders is Director of Admissions and Alumni Affairs at the Bernard J. Dunn School of Pharmacy at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia.

Bundle the Cost of Books into Tuition, Already

John W. Dysart
President
The Dysart Group

Virtually every college and university is concerned with retention and graduation rates. Many meetings have been held, and programs initiated, and retention officers hired to improve retention rates. One of the easiest steps you can take to increase your retention and graduation rates is to include the cost of books in your tuition.

- The U.S. Public Interest Research Group released a study finding that 65% of college students skipped buying some or all textbooks.

- This should not be surprising, as the cost of textbooks has soared over the last 50 years at three times the rate of inflation.

- The cost of textbooks has risen at more than four times the rate of inflation since 2006.

- The average cost for books is now over $1,200 according to The College Board.

- Students elected not to buy books despite their belief that it would hurt their ability to be academically successful.

- A survey by VitalSource showed that 50% of students who delayed textbook purchases saw their grades drop.

- Data from 2019 indicated that 63% of students said they opted not to purchase books.

- We should not be surprised that so many students experience academic difficulties when so many start classes without the basic tools necessary for success.

There are now a variety of companies and publishers willing to partner with colleges and universities to offer affordable digital, paper or combination options.

It will be important to involve faculty in the process of changing the institutional approach to book purchases, as moving to digital-only vendors or vendors offering reduced pricing may limit textbook choice. Faculty may need to make some compromises to ensure every student is provided with all textbooks.

The Department of Education has issued rules for institutions interested in including the cost of books in tuition.

- The institution must be able to show that it can offer the books at below-market rates.

- You must include a mechanism for students to opt-out.

This is a good time to research the possibilities for providing textbooks for all your students. It is a relatively easy but important step towards better retention outcomes.

ENROLLMENT MANAGER
Dwyer Education Strategies
195 North Harbor Dr. #4701
Chicago, IL 60601

THE DYSART GROUP is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to more than 200 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission. New student enrollments have grown by as much as 70% in a single cycle while discount rates have been controlled. Proven strategies have increased retention rates by as much as 7% in one year.

thedysartgroup.com
(312) 888-3199
thedysartgroup@gmail.com