

The “BIG PICTURE”: Key Causes of Student Attrition & Key Components of a Comprehensive Student Retention Plan

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I. ROOT CAUSES OF STUDENT *ATTRITION* AND SYSTEMIC *STRATEGIES* FOR PROMOTING STUDENT *PERSISTENCE*

- #1. *ACADEMIC* Roots**—student withdrawal related to:
(a) inadequate *preparation* to meet the academic demands of college coursework
(b) *disinterest in/boredom with* the content of courses or their method of delivery.
- #2. *MOTIVATIONAL* Roots**—student attrition related to:
(a) low level of *commitment* to college in general or the specific college attended
(b) *perceived irrelevance* of the college experience.
- #3. *PSYCHOSOCIAL* Roots**—student departure related to:
(a) *social* factors
(b) *emotional* issues.
- #4. *FINANCIAL* ROOTS**—student attrition related to:
(a) *inability (or perceived inability) to afford* the total cost of college
(b) *perception* that the *cost* of college *outweighs* its *benefits*.

#1. ACADEMIC ROOTS

1.1 *ACADEMIC UNDERPREPAREDNESS*

Attrition stemming from students being inadequately prepared to accommodate the *academic demands* of college and meet minimal *academic standards*, i.e., attrition due to *academic failure or dismissal*.

Retention Strategies:

- * *Academic Alliances:* college and high school faculty collaborate to identify key/core preparatory knowledge and skills.

- * Initial course *placement* and subsequent course *sequencing* that carefully builds on *pre-requisite* or *co-requisite* skills/knowledge
- * *Early-alert (Early-warning)* systems
- * Early identification & recruitment of *academically gifted* students for *honors* programs and *peer tutoring*
- * *Collaboration* between *course instructors* and *academic support* services to promote effective identification and academic referral of students needing academic skill-building.
- * Promoting early academic skill-development via a *first-year seminar* (student success course) and/or *infusing* academic success strategies into the *first-year curriculum*

1.2 ACADEMIC *DISINTEREST (BOREDOM)*

Attrition triggered by lack of student *interest* in, or *enthusiasm* for, the type of academic learning experience that characterizes college coursework (i.e., the content of courses and/or the process of course delivery).

Retention Strategies:

- * *Faculty Development*—promoting the use of “engaging” *pedagogy*
- * *Curriculum Development*—promoting the design of “engaging” *courses*.
- * Increasing faculty use of *engaging pedagogies* and design of *engaging courses* via:
 - faculty *recruitment, orientation, & development*
 - faculty *recognition, rewards, & incentives*

#2. MOTIVATIONAL ROOTS

2.1 *LOW INITIAL COMMITMENT*

Attrition resulting from *weak initial intent* of the student to *stay at, and graduate from, the particular college* s/he is attending.

Retention Strategies:

- * Promoting *early* institutional and/or departmental *identification/incorporation* via *rituals*
- * Showcasing *alumni* success stories.
- * Community *outreach* and *inclusion*
- * On-campus *employment*
- * On-campus *living*

2.2 COMPETING “EXTERNAL” COMMITMENTS

Attrition stemming from *concurrent commitments or obligations* to communities outside of college (e.g., family, friends, or work), which “pull away” students’ time and energy that would otherwise be committed to higher education.

Retention Strategies:

- * *Outreach* and *inclusion* of external communities
- * Increasing time spent by students *on campus*

2.3 IRRELEVANCY

Attrition deriving from students’ uncertainty about whether the academic experience is relevant to “*real life*” outside the classroom, or pertinent to their *personal and professional plans*.

Retention Strategies:

- * Intentional, explicit articulation of the *benefits* of *liberal learning & general education*
- * “Developmental” *academic advising*
- * Intrusive promotion of students’ *long-range planning*
- * Integration of *academic advising & career counseling services*

* Integrating *experiential* learning opportunities into the formal curriculum

* *Collaboration* between *academic departments* and *career development services*

#3. PSYCHOSOCIAL ROOTS

3.1 ISOLATION

Attrition caused by an *absence of personal and meaningful social contact* with other members of the college community, resulting in feelings of *separation* or *marginalization*.

Retention Strategy: Promoting students' "*social integration*"

* Promoting student-student (*peer*) interaction

* Promoting student-faculty interaction

* Promoting student-staff interaction.

3.2 INCONGRUENCE (a.k.a., INCOMPATIBILITY)

Attrition attributable to poor institutional or departmental "fit," which stems from a *mismatch* between the *student's* expectations, interests, or values and those of the *prevailing community*.

Retention Strategies:

* Increasing the *amount and accuracy* of institutional and departmental information available to students *prior to entry*, i.e., during the marketing/recruitment process.

* Adopting student recruitment and admissions practices that promote better student-college "fit"

* Intentional creation of diverse (heterogeneous) student sub-communities or special-interest groups to provide students with a social "niche."

3.3 TRANSITIONAL ADJUSTMENT DIFFICULTIES

Attrition resulting from new students having trouble coping with the *initial changes, demands* or *stressors* that accompany transition into the college and/or departmental "culture."

Retention Strategies:

- * New-student *orientation* program
- * “Extended-orientation” *course* (a.k.a., student success or college success course)
- * “*Front-loading*” of most effective, student-centered instructors and advisors
- * *Proactive & intrusive* delivery of psychosocial support (e.g., early identification, referral, and collaboration with personal counseling services)
- * Minimizing, streamlining, and personalizing *institutional bureaucracy*.

#4. FINANCIAL ROOTS

4.1 INABILITY (OR PERCEIVED INABILITY) TO AFFORD COLLEGE

Retention Strategies:

- * Strategic financial-aid *packaging*
- * Financial-aid & money-management *counseling*

4.2 PERCEPTION THAT *COST* OF COLLEGE *OUTWEIGHS* ITS *BENEFITS*

Retention Strategies:

- * Show the real *numbers*: early, intentional education about the *fiscal benefits* of a college education
- * Show the *people*: fiscally successful *alumni*.

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II. HOW SHOULD RETENTION PROGRAMS BE DELIVERED?

The Process of Retention Intervention: 12 Powerful *Properties/Principles* of Program *Delivery*

1. **STUDENT-CENTERED:** The program is *oriented* toward, *focused* on, and *driven* by a genuine concern for the *needs and welfare of students* (rather than by institutional habit/convenience, or the needs/desires of faculty and staff).

2. **INTENTIONAL (PURPOSEFUL):** The program is *deliberately designed* with the conscious intent of implementing *research- and theory-grounded principles* of effective student learning and development, i.e.: (a) *active involvement*—program delivery promotes student “engagement” (depth of involvement) in the college experience, and (b) *social integration*—program delivery promotes frequent, high-quality student interaction with other members of the college community (peers, faculty, staff), thus serving to socially “connect” students to the institution—providing them with a sense of community membership.

3. **PROACTIVE:** *Early, preventative* action is taken that addresses students’ needs and adjustment issues in an *anticipatory* fashion, i.e., *before* they eventuate in problems that require reactive intervention.

4. **INTRUSIVE:** The college initiates supportive action by *reaching out* to students and bringing or delivering the program *to* students (rather than passively waiting and hoping that students will take advantage of it), thus increasing the likelihood that the program reaches *all (or the vast majority of)* students who would profit from it.

5. **DIVERSIFIED:** The program is *tailored or customized* to meet the *distinctive* needs of different student *subpopulations*.

6. **PERSONALIZED:** The program is delivered in a manner that recognizes students as *individuals*, and makes them feel *personally significant*.

7. **COMPREHENSIVE (HOLISTIC):** Focuses on the student as a “*whole person*,” and addresses the full range of *academic and non-academic* factors that affect student success.

8. **SYSTEMIC:** The program permeates *multiple areas* of the institution’s organizational

structure or system, ensuring that it functions in a “mainstreamed” or centralized fashion, thus increasing its potential for having *pervasive* and *recursive* influence on the student’s college experience, as well as a reformative and transformative effect on the college itself.

9. **DEVELOPMENTAL:** The program is delivered in a *timely, longitudinal sequence* that meets student needs and educational challenges which emerge at different *stages* of the college experience.
10. **DURABLE:** The program is *institutionalized* by being “built into” the organizational structure/blueprint and annual budget of the institution, thus ensuring that the program has *longevity* and is experienced *perennially* by successive cohorts of students.
11. **COLLABORATIVE:** The program involves cooperative *alliances or partnerships* between different organizational units of the college—which work in a *complementary, interdependent* fashion to increase the program’s capacity for exerting a multiplicative or synergistic effect on student success.
12. **EMPIRICAL (EVIDENTIARY):** The program is supported and driven by *assessment data* (both quantitative and qualitative) that are used *summatively* to “prove” program impact or value, and *formatively* to continually “improve” program quality.

III. WHEN SHOULD PROGRAMMATIC ACTION BE TAKEN?

RETENTION-INTERVENTION TIMELINE: A LONGITUDINAL CONTINUUM OF *PROACTIVE-TO-REACTIVE* PRACTICES DESIGNED TO PROMOTE STUDENT PERSISTENCE

PROACTIVE

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1. *Summer Transition/Summer Bridge* Programs
 2. *New-Student Orientation & Convocation*
 3. *Extended-Orientation Course* (New-Student Seminar)(Student-Success Course)
 4. *Early-Alert/Early-Warning* System (e.g., absenteeism reports during first 4 wks.)
 5. *Midterm-Grade* Reports (e.g., at 7-8 weeks into the semester)
 6. “*Red Flag*” Procedures (e.g., failure to pre-register or renew financial aid)
 7. *Exit Interviews/Surveys* (administered during the process of withdrawal)
 8. *Already-Withdrawn/Departed-Student Surveys* (conducted after withdrawal)
 9. *Re-Recruitment of Withdrawn Students*: Converting “Dropouts” to “Stop-Outs”

REACTIVE

IV. WHERE SHOULD RETENTION EFFORTS BE DIRECTED?

KEY TARGET AREAS & SPECIFIC ACTION STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING STUDENT PERSISTENCE

Drawing on a base of higher education research, scholarship, and practice, the following five general areas are offered as potential zones of influence or arenas for retention intervention:

- #1. *Institutional Research: Student Assessment & Program Evaluation***
- #2. *First-Year Experience: Proactive Programs & Practices***
- #3. *Academic Affairs: Curriculum, Instruction, & Academic-Support Services***
- #4. *Student Affairs: Co-Curriculum, Student Life, & Student-Support Services***
- #5. *College Administration: Institutional Procedures, Policies, & Priorities***

In the following sections of this manuscript, each of these general target areas is accompanied by an itemized set of specific retention-promoting practices.

Target Area #1. ***INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH:*** **STUDENT ASSESSMENT & PROGRAM EVALUATION**

1.1 Conduct institutional (local) assessment of student retention and attrition patterns from entry-to-exit that includes the assessment of: (a) educational *goals and intentions* of students at *college entry*—to serve as basis for subsequent student tracking; (b) percentage of student attrition from *term to term*; and (c) percentage of student attrition that occurs *during* and *between* academic terms.

1.2 Administer student *satisfaction/opinion* surveys, and compare: (a) the responses of students from different *subgroups/subpopulations* (e.g., commuters vs. residents; native vs. international students), (b) students interested in different *academic programs* (e.g., science, humanities, undeclared majors), (c) *returning vs. non-returning* students, (d) *student* responses versus those of *faculty, staff, and administrators*.

1.3 Conduct *qualitative* research (e.g., student focus groups) to assess students' *needs* and *feelings* about the quality of the college experience.

1.4 Adopt administrative procedures for assuring that withdrawing students who are *eligible to return* to the college are apprised of their *option* to do so, and that they leave fully informed about what *procedures* they are to follow to be *re-enrolled* or *re-admitted*.

1.5 Conduct "*exit interviews*" with students who *intend to depart*, or are *in the process of departing*.

1.6 *Survey students* (by mail, by phone, or on-line) who have already *withdrawn* to assess their reasons for departing and their retrospective perceptions of the college.

1.7 Survey or interview *sophomores* to assess their *retrospective* perceptions of how well the college's first-year program facilitated their transition from high school to higher education, and what advice they would have for improving the quality of the first-year experience.

1.8 Conduct assessments that compare *pre-intervention* retention rates with *post-intervention* retention rates. (For example, compare the average retention rate of students during the two-year period just prior to implementation of a retention program with the average retention rate for the two-year period immediately following program implementation).

Target Area #2.

THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE: PROACTIVE PROGRAMS & PRACTICES

2.1 Provide a substantive *orientation* program for new students that orients them to *people* (not just buildings), and gives them the opportunity to *interact* meaningfully with peers, faculty, and support staff.

2.2 Expose new students to experienced and trained *peer orientation-week leaders* during the orientation process.

2.3 Include a component of new-student orientation that is designed for students' *parents* and *family* members and discuss the role they can play in supporting first-year student adjustment and success.

2.4 Adopt a *celebratory ritual* at college entry—e.g., *convocation ceremony*—at which time new students are formally welcomed and “inducted” into the college community.

2.5 “Extend” new-student orientation into the critical first term by means of an *extended-orientation course* or *new-student seminar*.

2.6 Provide first-year students with the opportunity to *co-register for the same block of courses* during the same academic term so that they can develop “*learning communities*” (e.g., linking a new-student seminar with an English composition course).

2.7 Provide special *high school-to-college transitional support* for *academically at-risk* students *before* they encounter a full load of college courses (e.g., summer bridge or summer transition program).

2.8 Assess the *basic skills* of all incoming students *at college entry* to diagnose their academic preparedness and to *place* them in courses or programs that are commensurate with their entering levels of academic-skill development.

2.9 Disseminate current information on the *characteristics and needs* of first-year students to faculty, staff, and administration (e.g., via a first-year experience newsletter).

2.10 Increase the percentage of *first-year courses* taught by *full-time* faculty—as opposed to graduate teaching assistants, part-time or adjunct faculty.

(Note: This suggestion stems from research which indicates that, although the teaching effectiveness of part-time faculty is equivalent to full-time faculty, part-timers are less available to students outside the classroom—often because they are working part-time at other educational institutions or in other occupations.)

2.11 “*Front load*” experienced and effective instructors to teach first-year courses.

2.12 Increase the number of *introductory, general-education* courses taken by first-year students that have class sizes *less than 25*.

2.13 Maintain *low class size* for *foundational, academic-skill development* courses commonly taken by first-year students—e.g., elementary mathematics, writing (composition), and oral communication (public speaking).

2.14 “*Front load*” academic advisors who have the interest, competence, and commitment to effectively advise first-year students.

2.15 Adopt *intentionally designed* practices or procedures that ensure first-year students have contact with their academic advisors during the *first six weeks of the first term* (for example, by means of a class assignment in the new-student seminar or another first-term course which requires students to meet with their advisor and develop a tentative long-range, educational plan).

2.16 Utilize *peer support* programs in which more experienced *student paraprofessionals* are trained to facilitate new students’ social and emotional development during their critical first year of college life (e.g., peer mentors, peer counselors, peer residential advisors).

2.17 Establish first-year *residential programs* that are intentionally designed to create an educational, “*living-learning*” *environment* in which there is meaningful student development programming and where *academic* experiences are *integrated* with residential life. (For example, make any or all of the following academic services available in student residences: computer access, peer tutoring, academic advisement, faculty office hours, seminars, colloquia, classes, test-review sessions.)

2.18 Maximize *on-campus residential opportunities* for “*at-risk*” students, and *strategically assign* students to particular residences, residential floors, or residential advisors with the deliberate intent of enhancing their retention, academic achievement, and personal development during their first year of college.

2.19 Intentionally assign *roommates* to campus residences in a strategic attempt to maximize social integration and friendship formation.

2.20 Develop an *early-warning* system for first-year students who are displaying excessive class *absenteeism*, in which they are routinely referred to their academic advisor or an academic support service.

2.21 Develop a “*red-flag*” procedure or system for identifying and connecting with first-year students who show signs that they are *intending to leave* the college (e.g., failure to pre-register for next term’s classes; failure to reapply for financial aid; failure to renew residential life agreement).

2.22 Acknowledge first-year student achievement by means of an end-of-the-year *congratulatory letter* or *ceremony* for students who persisted to *completion of the first year* in good academic standing, with *special recognition* for those students who achieved *academic excellence* or made significant contributions to *student life* outside the classroom.

2.23 Remember that *transfer students* are also first-year students who are new to the college; their transition and retention may be facilitated by the following practices:

- offering a *transfer-student orientation* program or *transfer-student convocation* to welcome new transfer students and integrate them with native students;
- allowing *junior transfers* the opportunity to live *on campus* in student residences with *juniors and seniors*—versus limiting their options to freshman dorms or off-campus housing;
- providing transfer students with the opportunity to apply for campus housing and to register for classes *at the same time as native students*—as opposed to automatically placing them last on the list;
- *designating* a particular member or group within the college community (e.g., staff member, faculty member, or cross-functional committee) to be in charge of coordinating orientation and transitional support programs for first-year transfer students—as opposed to letting this responsibility “fall through the cracks” of an administrative structure that is not explicitly designed to meet the needs of new students who enter the college after their freshman year.

Target Area #3.

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS:

CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ACADEMIC-SUPPORT SERVICES

FACULTY ORIENTATION & DEVELOPMENT:

3.1 Conduct a *new-faculty orientation* program that includes discussion of the *faculty's role in promoting student retention*.

3.2 Conduct an ongoing *faculty development* program designed to enhance instructional quality and promote teaching-for-retention strategies, such as: (a) developing rapport with students (e.g., learning students' *names* and personal interests); (b) *actively involving* students with the subject matter, with the instructor, and with other students; (c) engaging students in *collaborative learning* inside and outside the classroom; (d) providing students with *feedback* on their academic performance that is *prompt, proactive, and personalized* (e.g., early written feedback on individual tests and assignments); and (e) promoting contact with students outside the classroom (e.g., faculty-student conferences).

FACULTY ROLES, REWARDS, & RECOGNITION:

3.3 Increase the *weight* given to student-centered, retention-promoting faculty activities when making decisions about faculty *retention, promotion, and tenure*.

3.4 Publicly *recognize and reward* faculty for excellence in student-centered, retention-promoting activities.

3.5 Encourage and reward faculty for research and scholarship relating to *student learning, student development, and student retention*.

3.6 Adopt and enforce a *stated policy* about the *minimum number of weekly office hours* that faculty should be available to students, so as to ensure that students have opportunities to interact with faculty outside the classroom.

3.7 Explicitly *encourage, recognize, and reward* faculty for involvement with students outside the classroom.

3.8 *Intentionally* design academic programs, structures, or procedures that explicitly foster student-faculty interaction outside the classroom (e.g., faculty-student *mentoring* programs, faculty-student *research teams*, faculty-student *teaching teams*, *faculty-sponsored* student clubs and organizations).

3.9 Assess and weigh student-centeredness and sensitivity to student-retention issues during the process of *recruiting and selecting* faculty to the college. (For example, include students and student development professionals on faculty-hiring committees and, as part of the hiring process, ask faculty candidates to provide a teaching demonstration, or engage in a simulated interaction with students.

ACADEMIC ADVISEMENT:

3.10 Require students to *confer* with, and obtain a *signature* from an academic advisor before they can *register for, add, or drop* courses.

3.11 Educate academic advisors about the need to avoid the conception that advising is synonymous with course scheduling, and provide them with a substantive advisor *orientation, training, and development* program that prepares them to provide comprehensive *developmental academic advising*—i.e., personalized advising that relates students' present academic experiences to their future life plans, and connects students with key campus-support professionals who can most effectively address their present needs and facilitate realization of their future plans.

3.12 Establish an *advisor:student ratio* (e.g., 1:20) that is conducive to developmental academic advising.

3.13 Provide special academic advising support for *undecided* students—e.g., pair them with advisors who are specially trained to work with students who are uncertain about their academic major and future career plans.

3.14 Periodically conduct *group advising* sessions, whereby students with similar academic or career interests (e.g., sociology majors) are advised together in order to promote *peer support and collaboration* with respect to academic and career planning.

3.15 Select and train *peer academic advisors* to support faculty advisors and facilitate the course-selection and registration process.

3.16 Develop a system for *recruiting and selecting advisors* to identify faculty advisors who have the interest and commitment needed to provide developmental academic advising (e.g., adopt advising experience/effectiveness as one criterion in the recruitment and selection of new faculty).

3.17 Develop an *evaluation system* that provides advisors with individual *feedback* on the quality of their academic advising.

3.18 Develop a system for *recognizing and rewarding* high-quality academic advising—e.g., have advising “count” in decisions about faculty retention, promotion or tenure, and in decisions about “merit pay” or salary increases.

LEARNING-RESOURCE CENTER SERVICES:

3.19 Make learning-support services *highly visible* to students (e.g., pictures and campus phone numbers of support professionals advertised in campus flyers, posters, newsletters, or the college newspaper).

3.20 Take *institution-initiated* action to deliver support services *intrusively* to students through such practices as: (a) bringing support services to students on their “turf” (e.g., providing workshops in student residences or the student union), (b) integrating support services into the classroom (e.g., student-service professionals as guest speakers in class; peer tutors invited to class), and (c) requiring, or providing students with strong incentives to take advantage of support services (e.g., as a course assignment or as a condition for registration or graduation).

3.21 Implement an efficient and effective *communication-and-referral* system whereby classroom instructors routinely refer students in need of academic assistance to support service professionals and classroom instructors who, in turn, receive feedback about whether referred students actually act on the referral—and, if so, what type of support they received.

3.22 Establish an *early-warning* or *early-alert* system through which first-term students receive feedback about their academic progress (grades) at midterm, or earlier, so corrective action can be taken before final course grades are determined.

3.23 Maximize availability of, and accessibility to, *peer tutoring*—i.e., academic assistance provided by experienced and trained students.

3.24 Have *supplemental instruction (SI)* available for “high-risk courses” (classes with historically high attrition rates or low grades) and/or “gateway courses” (classes that either enable or block student entry to college majors), whereby students who have done well in such courses, re-attend the class and help novice learners during additional (supplemental) class sessions that are regularly scheduled outside of class time.

3.25 Devise special-support strategies for students on *academic probation* (e.g., peer tutoring or mentoring).

3.26 Develop academic *mentoring* programs whereby student protégés are mentored by more experienced undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff, alumni, or community volunteers (e.g., career professionals or retirees).

3.27 Have academic support professionals provide instructional faculty with *diagnostic feedback* (e.g., via academic-support service newsletters, presentations or workshops for faculty) about the types of academic assistance that students typically *need or seek*, and *common errors* in students' approaches to learning that are witnessed in academic support settings.

3.28 Provide *course-integrated* library instruction, whereby students learn information search, retrieval, and evaluation skills within the *context of specific course content* or *course assignments* (e.g., research paper or group project).

Target Area #4.

STUDENT AFFAIRS:

CO-CURRICULUM, STUDENT LIFE, & STUDENT-SUPPORT SERVICES

4.1 Offer *numerous* and *varied* co-curricular *opportunities* on campus that are intentionally designed to promote student involvement, especially in the following areas: (a) student participation in *college governance*, (b) *campus employment*—e.g., work-study, (c) *internships*—on and off campus, (d) *volunteerism* (*service learning*), and (e) *student clubs* or *organizations*—including opportunities for students to initiate and create new ones of their own choosing.

4.2 Promote co-curricular opportunities *visibly* and “*intrusively*” on campus, and *aggressively recruit* students to participate—e.g., “activities periods” designated and reserved at times when no classes are scheduled; personal invitations from peer leaders, academic advisors, faculty, or student development staff; individual mailings or phone contacts.

4.3 Provide students with *incentives* or *recognition* for co-curricular involvement, such as (a) free food, prizes, or privileges for participants—e.g., priority parking or priority registration, (b) participation required as course assignments or designated as extra-credit opportunities, (c) awards events or ceremonies recognizing student contributions to the co-curriculum, and/or (d) student involvement experiences documented on an official *co-curricular* or *student development “transcript”*?

4.4 Forge meaningful *integration* between the curriculum and co-curriculum through coordinated planning and delivery, so that students see the “connections” between their in-class and out-of-class experiences.

4.5 Integrate *experiential learning* into the curriculum, enabling students to gain meaningful real-world experience, such as: (a) *service-learning* (*volunteer*) experiences that may also serve to test student interest in different careers, and (b) *internship* opportunities or *cooperative education* experiences that are *linked to* the students' intended or declared *academic major*.

4.6 Seek to create *multiple and meaningful work-study* (on-campus employment) opportunities for *economically disadvantaged* students that are designed to (a) help them afford college, (b) promote their retention by connecting them to the institution, and (c) enable them to gain real-life work experience.

4.7 Create multiple *leadership* opportunities for students on campus (e.g., peer counseling, peer tutoring, peer academic advising, peer orientation-week leaders).

4.8 Formally recognize or reward students' *leadership contributions to the college*.

4.9 Design and schedule co-curricular experiences with sensitivity to the needs and commitments of *commuter* students. For example: (a) *schedule* activities at times that are conducive to commuter participation—e.g., early morning or early evening, (b) employ *communication* strategies to keep commuters “in the loop”—e.g., commuter message boards, newsletters, hot lines, or web pages, (c) designate a campus *place or space* for commuters to socialize and network—e.g., commuter lounge, and (d) design special *activities* that are targeted specifically for commuters—e.g., commuter appreciation days.

Target Area #5.

COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION: PROCEDURES, POLICIES, & PRIORITIES

5.1 Encourage high-level administrators to *demonstrate visible support* for retention initiatives by their *presence* at retention programming events, by *comments* they make during formal addresses, and in their *written* statements or documents (e.g., college memos, position statements, strategic plans).

5.2 Encourage administrators to seek and provide necessary *resources* (human, fiscal, and physical) to support a viable, comprehensive retention program.

5.3 Have retention programs “*built into*” the *institutional budget* and *administrative structure* of the college (e.g., organizational blueprint or flowchart), thus enhancing their prospects for long-term survival.

5.4 Request administrators to provide *incentives* for faculty and staff to promote their involvement in retention programs and initiatives (e.g., stipends, mini-grants, release time, travel and professional development funding, administrative or student assistance).

5.5 Solicit administrative support for the *professional development* of faculty and staff in areas relating to *student retention and student success*.

5.6 Encourage administrators to *recognize or reward* faculty and staff contributions to first-year students (e.g., meritorious performance awards; letters of commendation; credit toward retention, promotion, or advancement).

5.7 Seek administrative encouragement of, and support for, college *rituals* that are designed to build *campus community* and increase *institutional identification* among students.

5.8 Incorporate a *retention committee* into the college's *table of organization* to ensure that the issue of student retention becomes "institutionalized" and receives sustained attention, and be sure that the composition of this committee has *diverse representation*—which reflects the full range of institutional services that can impact student retention (e.g., academic affairs, student affairs, first-year experience, institutional research, academic advising, and financial aid).

RECOMMENDED REFERENCES & RESOURCES ON STUDENT RETENTION

References:

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- Terrell, M. C., & Wright, D. J. (Eds.) (1988). *From survival to success: Promoting minority student retention*. NASPA Monograph No. 9. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
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Resources:

- Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing. (<http://baywood.com>)
- Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education* (Newsletter). Madison, WI: Magna Publications. (www.magnapubs.com)

Website:

- <http://www.noellellevitz.com> (See profiles of campuses with award-winning retention programs.)

Appendix A

THE ART & SCIENCE OF MAKING *STUDENT REFERRALS*: SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

1. *Describe* the **goals and services** of the referred service. (Don't assume that the student already know its purpose or function.)
2. *Personalize* the referral: Refer the student to a **person** (a **name**)—rather than an office.
3. Reassure the student of the **qualifications and capability** of the person to whom s/he is being referred.
4. Help the student identify *what* **questions** to ask and *how* to **approach** the resource person.
5. Make explicitly sure that the student knows **where** to go and how to get there.
6. **Phone** for an appointment while the student is *in your presence*.
7. **Walk** with the student to the referred person's *office*.
8. **Follow-up** the initial referral by asking the student *if* the contact occurred, *how* it went, and whether there will be *future* contact.
9. **Praise** the student for making the effort to seek support and taking a step toward self-improvement.

Appendix B

MAJOR *FORMS/VARIETIES* OF FACULTY-STUDENT CONTACT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

1. *Dining* together
2. Attending *cultural* and *recreational* events
3. *Recruitment* of new students
4. Involvement in new-student *orientation* and/or *convocation*
5. Academic *Advising*
6. *Mentoring* Programs
7. *Conferencing* with students during *office hours*
8. *Experiential* learning (field trips, practicums, service learning, internships)
9. Sponsoring *student clubs and organizations*
10. Involvement in *student residences* (e.g., living-learning communities)
11. Faculty-student *committees*
12. Faculty-student *research* teams
13. Faculty-student *teaching* teams
14. Faculty-student *learning communities*

Appendix C

PROMOTING CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT & SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF *COMMUTER STUDENTS*: ONE-DOZEN PRELIMINARY POSSIBILITIES

1. *Assess* *who* your commuter students are. For example, what is their class standing (first-year or second-year), from where (and how far) do they commute, and with whom do they live (e.g., parents, roommates, alone)?
2. Publish a **commuter-student directory** (including phone numbers and e-mail addresses) to facilitate, carpooling, networking, and a sense of group identity.
3. Include a special, **commuter-student module or strand within new-student orientation** during which commuters are given the opportunity to meet and interact with each other.
4. Schedule at least one **“commuter awareness” event** during the academic year (e.g., commuter appreciation day at which commuters are given free lunch in the student café).
5. Encourage and support the development of a **commuter-student club or council**.
6. Include at least one **commuter student representative** in **student government** and on **campus committees or task forces** where there is student representation.
7. Designate a **commuter team** for participation in intramural sports and other forms of competition (e.g., teams representing each college residence and one or more teams from areas where there are large concentrations of commuters, such as PV, San Pedro, or Torrance).
8. Designate a **campus space/place** for commuters (e.g., section of the café, student center, or learning resource center).
9. Consider **direct mailing** of flyers or a newsletter to commuter students containing the same information that is available to students living in college residences.
10. Occasionally offer **college services/events in off-campus geographical areas that are populated with high concentrations of commuter students** (e.g., dinners at a San Pedro restaurant, movie night at a Torrance theatre, or study sessions at a PV library).
11. Include a **commuter student award** in the end-of-year award ceremonies (e.g., for academic achievement and/or co-curricular contributions).
12. Earmark a small **scholarship or merit-based stipend** for a returning (sophomore) commuter student and deliver this award in a public forum, such as convocation.

Position Proposal

DIRECTOR OF STUDENT RETENTION

Position Qualifications

Master's Degree in College Student Personnel or related area, with interest and experience in the areas of student counseling, advising, and retention.

Position Description

Since the causes of, and cures for, student attrition encompass a wide range of factors and influences, the Director of Retention will report to the *Office of the President*. Collaboration is the key to this position, because the retention director will need to partner with virtually all other offices on campus in order to implement and execute a comprehensive, coordinated student-retention program.

The following five general areas are offered as potential *zones of influence* or *arenas of action* for the Director of Student Retention.

- 1. Institutional Research: Student Assessment & Program Evaluation**
- 2. Academic Affairs: Curriculum, Classroom Instruction & Academic Support**
- 3. Student Development: Co-Curriculum, Student Life, & Student Services**
- 4. Offices of Admission, Business, and Financial Aid**
- 5. College Administration: Institutional Procedures, Policies, & Priorities**

Each one of the foregoing target areas involves a set of specific responsibilities, such as those itemized below.

Area 1.

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: STUDENT ASSESSMENT & PROGRAM EVALUATION

- 1.1** Assist with institutional research on student retention and attrition patterns within and between academic terms.
 - 1.2** Coordinate and disseminate *CIRP* survey data on the *characteristics and needs* of the entering class.
 - 1.3** Conduct student *satisfaction/opinion* surveys and focus-group interviews to assess students' *needs and feelings* about the quality of the Marymount experience.
 - 1.4** Survey or interview *sophomores* to assess their *retrospective* perceptions of how well the college's first-year program facilitated their transition from high school to higher education, and what advice they would have for improving the quality of the first-year experience.
 - 1.5** Conduct "*exit interviews*" with students who *intend to* depart, or are *in the process of* departing.
 - 1.6** Survey students (by mail, by phone, or on-line) who have already *withdrawn* to assess their reasons for departure and their retrospective perceptions of the college.
 - 1.7** Conduct *assessment* on the effectiveness of *retention-improvement initiatives*.
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Area 2.

Academic Affairs: Curriculum, Classroom, & Academic Support

- 2.1 Teach a section of the *freshman seminar* (if time and interest allow).
- 2.2 Assist with Marymount's *early-warning* systems: (a) the *R.E.T.A.I.N.* procedure for students who are displaying excessive class *absenteeism*; (b) *midterm-progress reports* for students experiencing academic difficulty in one or more of their courses; (c) monitoring the performance of students placed on academic probation; (d) the "*red-flag*" procedure or system for identifying and connecting with students who show signs that they are *intending to leave* the college (e.g., failure to pre-register for next term's classes; failure to reapply for financial aid; failure to renew residential life agreement), and (e) the *phone-a-thon* conducted between semesters for students who have not made their commitment deposits for the upcoming term.
- 2.3 Implement administrative procedures for assuring that withdrawing students who are *eligible to return* to the college are apprised of their *option* to do so, and that they leave fully informed about what *procedures* they are to follow to be *re-enrolled* or *re-admitted*.
- 2.4 Assist in re-connecting with *withdrawn students* who are eligible to return to the college, and possibly *re-recruiting* them to the college (i.e., help convert "drop-outs" to "stop-outs").
- 2.5 Collaborate with the *Learning Center* to facilitate: (a) *communication-and-referral* system with classroom instructors, (b) *peer-partner* program, and (c) student-success *outreach* programs.
- 2.6 Collaborate with the *Academic Advisement Center* to assist in the planning and delivery of programs designed to educate *academic advisors* about the need to avoid the conception that advising is synonymous with course scheduling, and facilitate personalized advising that promotes retention by connecting students with key campus-support professionals.
- 2.7 Work closely with academic advisors who are responsible for *at-risk* students.
- 2.8 Assist in the *recognition of student achievement* (e.g., awards ceremony; end-of-the-year congratulatory letters or ceremony for students who persisted to completion of the first year in good academic standing, with *special recognition* for those students who achieved *academic excellence* or made significant contributions to student life outside the classroom).

Area 3.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT: Co-Curriculum, Student Life, & Student Services

- 3.1 Assist in the coordination and delivery of *new-student orientation*.
- 3.2 Assist in "*quality of life*" partnership program between the Offices of Student Development & Academic Affairs.
- 3.3 Assist in the development of *peer support* programs in which more experienced *student paraprofessionals* are *trained* to facilitate new students' social and emotional development during their critical first year of college life (e.g., peer mentors, peer advisors/counselors).

3.4 Assist in the coordination of student *volunteerism (service learning)*.

3.5 Explore ways that *campus ecology* (physical and social environment) might be improved to increase the amount of time students spend on campus, and possibly their retention at the college (e.g., tables, lounge areas, student gathering sites).

3.6 Assist in the design and development of co-curricular experiences for *commuter* students.

3.7 Collaborate with the *Office of Residential Life* to find on-campus and off-campus housing for new and returning students.

3.8 Serve as a *liaison* between *resident directors* and *academic advisors*.

3.9 Collaborate with *Counseling Services* to identify and alleviate non-academic (social/emotional) conditions that are contributing to student attrition.

3.10 Facilitate college-parent *communication* (e.g., parents newsletter).

Area 4.

OFFICES OF ADMISSION, BUSINESS, & FINANCIAL AID

4.1 Collaborate with the *Office of Admission* on *tracking* students (and different student populations) from application to matriculation to retention through graduation.

4.2 Work with *college admission* staff to identify *student-application data* that may be useful in predicting at-risk students and promoting student retention (e.g., using admission information to proactively “connect” students with campus clubs and student leaders that match their interests).

4.3 Collaborate with the *Business Office* to explore how billing/payment schedules and communiqués may impact student retention.

4.4 Collaborate with the *Office of Financial-Aid* to explore how aid packaging, communiqués, and opportunities for student employment (on and off campus) may influence retention.

Area 5.

COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION: Institutional Procedures, Policies, & Priorities

5.1 Serve as chair of the college’s *retention committee*.

5.2 Administer periodic *student-retention workshops* for the college.

5.3 Periodically disseminate a student-retention *newsletter* to the college community.

5.4 Design *between-semester mailings to students* that keep them “in the loop” and combat between-semester attrition (e.g., “summer melt” and “winter drift”).

5.5 Develop a “*master schedule*” of retention activities for the fall, winter, spring, and summer terms that complements the scheduling of academic and student life programs.

5.6 Evaluate administrative policies, procedures, rules, regulations, and communication for their implications and their possible impact on student retention (e.g., letters to students being placed on probation or being disciplined for college-policy infractions.).

5.7 Explore ways in which retention practices or programs may be “*built into*” the *institutional budget* and *organizational structure* of the college (i.e., its blueprint or flowchart), thus enhancing their prospects for long-term survival.

5.8 Work with high-level administrators to *demonstrate visible support* for retention initiatives.

5.9 Encourage administrators to seek and provide necessary *resources* (human, fiscal, and physical) to support a viable, comprehensive retention program.

5.10 Explore with administrators the creation of *incentives* for faculty and staff to promote their involvement in retention programs and initiatives (e.g., stipends, mini-grants, release time, travel and professional development funding, administrative or student assistance).

5.11 Solicit administrative support for the *professional development* of faculty and staff in areas relating to *student retention and student success*.

5.12 Seek administrative encouragement of, and support for, college *rituals* that are designed to build *campus community* and increase students’ *institutional identification* and *college affiliation*.

RETENTION COMMITTEE

Mission Statement

The primary mission of the retention committee is to combat the popular misconception that student enrollment is synonymous with student recruitment, i.e., the total number of students enrolled depends entirely on the number of students recruited. Instead, total student enrollment (and total tuition revenue) during any academic term is a function of both the number of new students who have been recruited to the college and the total number of students retained by the college, i.e., the number of students who have returned to the college to continue their enrollment. Moreover, the relationship between recruitment and retention is more than simply additive; it is interactive or multiplicative. For instance, the more satisfied students are with their experience at the college, the more likely they are to be retained, and more satisfied students (customers) are more likely to have a positive effect on the number of students recruited (e.g., by word-of-mouth recommendations or testimonials).

It is our contention that all members of the college community can play a significant role in promoting student retention. Faculty can have a major effect on student retention because they usually have the most regular and continuous contact with students on campus. Consequently, faculty are in an ideal position to observe specific student behaviors which can serve as warning signs or signals for potential student attrition (e.g., absenteeism, changes in classroom behavior, comments made during class discussions or on writing assignments). Similarly, student development professionals have access to other, out-of-class warning signs displayed by students who may be at risk for withdrawal (e.g., behavior in student residences; student comments during committee meetings or club activities).

Office support staff on campus also can affect student retention by the nature of their interpersonal interactions with students in office settings, the manner in which they communicate and enforce college policies and procedures, and by serving as potential mentors to students who engage in work-study or other forms of on-campus employment. As retention scholars like to put it, "Successful retention is nothing more than successful education" and, as such, it requires a "total institutional response."

The retention committee feels strongly that more attention and intervention with respect to student retention will reduce the total number of non-returning students, serving to increase our annual enrollment and the tuition revenue generated as a result thereof. Any altruistic effort we make to promote the satisfaction and success of our students at the college brings with it, as a natural byproduct, the self-serving advantage of increased student retention and institutional revenue. Thus, successful retention results in a "win-win" outcome, which benefits both the institution and its students. Furthermore, we feel that focusing future efforts on student retention is a much more cost-effective approach to increasing student enrollment than focusing exclusively on student recruitment efforts--which require substantial institutional expenditures (e.g., hiring of staff, travel funding, and advertising costs). National research suggests that increasing student enrollment via retention efforts is five times more cost effective than recruitment efforts (O'Keefe, 1987; Tinto, 1993), i.e., the cost of retaining one already-enrolled student approximates the cost of recruiting five new students to the college.

Goals and Objectives

1. To combat the common misperception that student enrollment is synonymous with student recruitment and raise college-wide consciousness that total student enrollment, and the tuition revenue generated thereby, reflects both the number of new students who have been *recruited to* the college *and* the total number of students retained by the college.
2. To conduct assessment of student retention for the purpose of answering the following questions about early or premature student departure(attrition) from Marymount:
 - (a) *How many* students are leaving? (e.g., What percentage of academically eligible students do not return to Marymount?)
 - (b) *Who* are the departing students? (e.g., Do they share common characteristics?)
 - (c) *When* are students leaving (e.g., during the term, between fall & spring, between spring & fall)?
 - (d) *Why* are students leaving? (e.g., Are there common causes of student dissatisfaction that are contributing to student departure?)
3. Promote awareness that effective retention requires a *total institutional response* and that all members of the college community can play a significant role in promoting student retention at the college, including:
 - (a) *faculty*—as teachers and advisors,
 - (b) *student development professionals*—as architects of student life programs on campus and in residence,
 - (c) *senior administrators* via their creation, communication, and enforcement of college policies and procedures, and
 - (d) *office support staff* via their interpersonal interactions with students in office settings.
4. Develop effective, proactive interventions designed to prevent student attrition and increase the total number of academically-eligible students who return each term.

RETENTION: WHY BOTHER?

1. Retention is an *all-college* issue:

- ▶ Everyone on campus plays a *role*.
- ▶ Everyone on campus *benefits*.

2. Retention is a *high-yield* activity.

3. Retention is an indicator of college *quality*.

4. Retention is a very *cost-effective* way to promote enrollment management.

One of the earliest published arguments for the cost effectiveness of retention as an enrollment management strategy, relative to student recruitment, was provided by Astin (1975) who noted that, "In four-year institutions, any change that deters students from dropping out can affect three classes of students at once, whereas any change in recruiting practices can affect only one class in a give year. From this viewpoint, investing resources to prevent dropping out may be more cost effective than applying the same resources to more vigorous recruitment. More important from an educational standpoint, changes that help students complete college, represent a real service to them, whereas successful recruiting efforts may simply change students' choice of institutions" (p. 2).

In the early 1980s, references appeared which estimated the cost of student recruitment efforts—which require substantial institutional expenditures (e.g., hiring of staff, travel funding, and advertising costs). Kramer (1982) estimated that recruitment costs ranged between \$200-\$800 per student. In contrast, other publications report that increasing student enrollment via retention efforts is 3-5 times more cost-effective than recruitment efforts, i.e., the cost of retaining one already-enrolled student approximates the cost of recruiting 3-5 new students to the college (Noel, Levitz, & Associates, 1985; Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1983; Tinto, 1975). In addition, students who are retained to graduation are much less likely to default on their student loans than students who drop out—due,

in large measure, to the fact that graduates are more likely to find gainful employment (Levitz, 1993).

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**POTENTIAL BYPRODUCTS OF INSTITUTIONAL
ATTENTION TO STUDENT RETENTION**

1. IMPROVED *ASSESSMENT*
2. IMPROVED *STUDENT LEARNING*
3. “CROSS-FUNCTIONAL” *COLLABORATION*
4. INSTITUTIONAL *REFORM*
5. COLLEGE *QUALITY*

FOUR CORE MEASURES (OUTCOMES) OF *STUDENT SUCCESS*

1. **RETENTION**: Do entering students *remain, re-enroll,* and *continue* their education at the college?
2. **ATTAINMENT**: Do students *persist to completion* of their degree, program, or educational goal?
3. **ACHIEVEMENT**: How much did students *learn* and *develop* while enrolled at the college?
4. **ADVANCEMENT**: Do students *proceed* to and *succeed* at *subsequent* educational or vocational endeavors for which their program or degree was designed to prepare them?