

College Student Retention - Defining Student Retention, A Profile of Successful Institutions and Students, Theories of Student Departure

Why do students leave college before completing a degree? This question is of interest not only to scholars, but also to employers, institutions, students, parents of students, and spouses. A student who leaves college before graduating paid tuition that will probably not be made up for through employment, for a person who lacks a college degree will have diminished lifetime earnings (compared to college graduates). In addition, there is a loss of tuition for the institution, a loss of a major in some department, and a loss of human capital—that is, the loss of highly trained individuals to enter the workforce or perform civic duties.

Retaining a student is fundamental to the ability of an institution to carry out its mission. A high rate of attrition (the opposite of retention) is not only a fiscal problem for schools, but a symbolic failure of an institution to achieve its purpose.

## **Defining Student Retention**

There are two extremes of student retention. *Normal progression*, typical of a *stayer*, or *retained student*, occurs when a student enrolls each semester until graduation, studies full-time, and graduates in about four years. A *dropout*, or *leaver*, is a student who enters college but leaves before graduating and never returns to that or any other school. Between these two extremes are *transfers*, students who begin studies at one institution and then transfer to another. From the student's perspective, transferring is normal progress. From the perspective of the institution where the student first enrolled, the student has dropped out.

While it is easy to identify a stayer, a student who has left college could return at any time. Students who re-enroll after quitting school are called *stopouts*. Students often quit school due to a financial shortfall or a family crisis and return a year later. Other students might start school, drop out to work or to raise a family, and return years, or even decades, later. Someone defined as a dropout could become redefined as a stopout

at any time. Other students become *slowdowns*, going from full-time attendance to taking just a few courses.

The previous definitions are from the perspective of a single institution. An important distinction must be made between students who meet their educational goals before graduating but do not receive a degree and students who enrolled intending to graduate but do not do so. For instance, a student might enter a college with the intention of taking three accounting courses to upgrade his or her status at work. When this is done, neither the institution nor the student fails, yet the institution would likely count the student as a dropout. Institutions that enroll large numbers of part-time students have to be very careful in understanding whether a low graduation rate represents institutional failure or institutional success. While a simple definition of retention or attrition may not be possible, an accurate description needs to consider the goals of the student upon entry.

Institutions often speak of *retention rates* or *graduation rates*. Institutions can calculate a meaningful retention rate only if they know the intentions of their students. Students who are not seeking a degree and leave school before graduation should not be counted as dropouts. Furthermore, overall retention or graduation rates are of little use to institutional planners. What is important is the retention rates for identifiable groups of students. When an institution has an overall graduation rate of 75 percent but only 15 percent of its Native American students graduate, the success of the majority masks problems in specific populations.

The following definition captures the essence of the problem of students leaving college prior to graduation: "A leaver or dropout is a student who enters a college or university with the intention of graduating, and, due to personal or institutional shortcomings, leaves school and, for an extended period of time, does not return to the original, or any other, school." In considering any definition, it is important to identify if the definition is from the perspective of the individual student, the institution, or from the economic or labor force perspective.

## **A Profile of Successful Institutions and Students**

Students that have economic, social, or educational advantages are the least likely to leave college, while students lacking these advantages are the most likely to leave. Advantaged students are also likely to attend the most elite schools, and since these students are least likely to leave school before graduating, these schools have the highest retention rates. The reverse is also true. Community colleges, regardless of their quality or value, are the lowest status institutions and have the lowest rates of retention. To say that the most elite schools have the highest retention rates is partly a tautology, because one part of the definition of eliteness is the rate of retention. Nevertheless, eliteness and student retention run hand in hand.

The highest institutional retention rates in the country are above 95 percent, while the lowest may be only 10 percent. Typical graduation rates for elite schools may be 85 percent or higher; for average schools about 50 percent; and for non-elite schools 15 to 25 percent. Freshmen are most likely to drop out of school, while seniors are least likely to leave. For an average institution, freshman to sophomore year attrition is about 25 percent; sophomore to junior year attrition is about 12 percent; junior to senior year attrition is about 8 percent; and about 4 percent of seniors might leave school. Roughly half of an incoming class graduates in four to five years.

While there may be exceptionally high or low rates of retention for individual institutions, and individual students may defy expectations, retention generally follows these patterns:

1. The higher the degree offered, the higher the retention rates; the exception to this rule is that elite private liberal arts colleges have higher retention rates than many institutions offering masters or doctoral degrees.
2. The higher the quality of the institution and the more elite it is, the higher the retention rates.
3. Older institutions with longer traditions and larger endowments have higher retention rates.
4. Institutions where the majority of the students attend classes full-time, are of a traditional age (18–23), and reside on campus have higher retention rates than

institutions where the majority of students attend parttime, are older or commuter students, and work full-time.

5. Predominantly white institutions that enroll a relatively high percentage of African-American, Hispanic, or Native American students will likely have lower retention rates than similar institutions enrolling fewer students from these groups; however, at many institutions minority students have higher graduation rates than majority students.

The characteristic profile of a student likely to remain in college and graduate in four to five years is implicit in this description of institutional retention rates. A typical retained student will enroll in college directly after high school (at age eighteen or nineteen); will attend, full-time, a selective four-year residential private college or university seeking a bachelor's degree; will come from a white or Asian family with educated parents with relatively high incomes (high socioeconomic status); and will have attended a high quality high school, taken college preparatory courses, received high grades in high school, and scored well on standardized tests. In addition, the student will intend to graduate, have a major and career goals clearly in mind, participate in numerous campus activities, enjoy being a student, feel that he or she fits in at school, and will have a positive attitude toward the school, the faculty, the courses taken, and the academic and social life of the college. The effects of these characteristics or circumstances are cumulative. The fewer of these attributes a student has, the greater the chances of the student withdrawing from college.

## **Theories of Student Departure**

Scholars have long held an interest in student departure, partly because it is a complex human behavior; partly because it is related to other factors like status attainment, self-development, and the development of human capital; and partly because it is a place where theory can have an impact on practice. Retention studies are important to institutions because if institutions can maintain or increase their retention rates, they can survive, and possibly prosper.

Since student retention is by definition a process that occurs over time, theoretical models tend to be longitudinal, complex, and contain several categories of variables that

reflect both student and institutional characteristics. *Theories of departure* provide an explanation of why students leave college. *Theoretical models* of departure are models based on theories, while *models of departure* identify factors assumed to be related to retention without providing an explanation of why the factors act the way they do. Theories, theoretical models, and models are used somewhat interchangeably in the literature.

Student retention models are complex because they contain a large number of variables, often set in a causal pattern. A variable could either affect retention directly, or it could affect some other variable that has a direct effect on retention. For example, high school grades could directly affect rates of retention (e.g., the higher the high school grades, the higher the rate of retention). High school grades could also be thought to affect retention indirectly; that is, the higher the high school grades, the higher the college grades—and the higher the college grades, the higher the rate of retention.

Since 1970, the main theoretical tradition in the study of student retention has been sociological, involving a search for commonalities of behavior that distinguish groups of students who stay from groups of students who leave. Psychological and sociopsychological approaches, concerned with how individuals assess themselves in an educational context, began to develop after 1980. In the decade of the 1990s there was an increasing interest in how economic factors affect retention and in how the cultural factors typical of subgroups of students affect retention decisions, particularly in terms of minority student retention. Other theoretical approaches have been taken, but have had little empirical study. Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (1991) offer a summary of the literature on student retention and other associated outcomes from college.

Vincent Tinto's model of student departure has had the greatest influence on our understanding of student retention. His theory helped guide a large number of dissertations and empirical studies of student retention. The model posits that students enter college with family and individual attributes as well as precollege schooling. They enter with certain commitments, both to finishing college and to staying at their college.

They enter an academic system that is characterized by grade performance and intellectual development, which together lead to academic integration, and they enter a social system where peer group interactions and faculty interactions lead to social integration. Academic and social integration work together to influence ongoing goal and institutional commitments, which, in turn, lead to the decision to remain in, or to leave, college. This model was later revised through the addition of commitments outside the institution and intentions to remain enrolled.

The explanatory theory underlying Tinto's model came most immediately from the research of William Spady (1971), who saw an analogy between committing suicide and dropping out of school. In both instances, according to Spady, a person leaves a social system. The French philosopher and sociologist Émile Durkheim had found that some people committed suicide because they lacked the values of the social system in which they participated, and because they were not supported by a group of friends. At the core of his model, Tinto borrowed Spady's use of Durkheim's two postulates to identify the concepts of academic and social integration. Academic integration was thought to be the result of sharing academic values, and social integration was viewed as the result of developing friendships with other students and faculty members. In Tinto's model, a student who does not achieve some level of academic or social integration is likely to leave school.

While Tinto's later model (1993) is similar in structure to his earlier ones, it offers another explanation of student departure: failure to negotiate the rites of passage. According to this theory, students would remain enrolled if they separated themselves from their family and high school friends, engaged in processes by which they identified with and took on the values of other students and faculty, and committed themselves to pursuing those values and behaviors.

A second theoretical thrust came from John Bean, based on empirical and theoretical studies published in the 1980s, an explanatory model of student retention (Bean 1990), and a psychological model of student retention developed by John Bean and Shevawn Eaton (2000). Originally based on a model of turnover in work organizations, Bean's

model evolved into one where the overall structure was based on a psychological model that linked any given behavior (in this case, retention) with similar past behavior, normative values, attitudes, and intentions. While based on psychological processes, the model was similar to Tinto's in that it was complex and longitudinal. The model differed from Tinto's original model in two important ways, however: It included environmental variables (or factors outside of the college that might affect retention) and a student's intentions, a factor found to be the best predictor of student retention. These factors were subsequently incorporated into Tinto's model in 1993.

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Bean's model, describing traditional-age students, posits that background variables, particularly a student's high school educational experiences, educational goals, and family support, influence the way a student interacts with the college or university that the student chose to attend. After matriculation (as in Tinto's model) the student interacts with institutional members in the academic and social arena. According to Bean, the student also interacts in the organizational (bureaucratic) area, and is simultaneously influenced by environmental factors, such as wanting to be with a significant other at another school or running out of money. A student's interaction with the institution leads the student to develop a set of attitudes toward himself or herself as

a student and toward the school. Academic capabilities (as indicated by grade point average), feeling one fits in at an institution, and loyalty to the institution are a secondary set of outcomes that are extremely important in determining a student's intentions to remain enrolled, as well as actually continuing enrollment. Bean and Barbara Metzner (1985) also developed a model of student retention for nontraditional students which reduced the emphasis on social integration factors since nontraditional (older, working, commuting) students have less interaction with others on campus than do traditional, residential students.

Bean and Eaton's (2000) model describes how three psychological processes affect academic and social integration. While attitude-behavior theory provides an overall structure for the model, self-efficacy theory, coping behavioral (approach-avoidance) theory, and attribution (locus of control) theory are used to explain how students develop academic and social integration.

These grand theories of student retention of the 1990s, which attempt to simplify a very complex action into a series of identifiable steps, are inadequate to deal with either specific populations or individual decisions. Because of this inadequacy, a series of articles was written to provide increased explanations of certain aspects of student retention. A collection of these partial theories, which provide a closer look at a certain aspects of student retention decisions, was published by John Braxton in 2000. This volume contains explanations of retention behavior based on economic factors, psychological processes, campus climate, student learning, campus cultures, ethnic differences, college choice, social reproduction, and power (critical theory).

Of these theoretical approaches, a number of studies of the economic influences on retention have been conducted, particularly by Edward St. John. Based on cost-benefit analyses, these studies examine how retention decisions are affected by ability to pay, family resources, student aid, perceptions of aid, and tuition.

Regardless of the particular approaches taken in a model, the general process of student retention remains the same: Both experiences before entering college and academic abilities are important; the way students interact in the social and academic



environment once at college are important, as are factors from outside of the institution, particularly the cost of attending the college; and the attitudes a student forms about the institution and about his or her role of being a student at a particular institution (Do I fit in? Am I developing? Am I validated?) are also important aspects of a student's decision to remain enrolled.

## **Specific Factors Affecting Retention Decisions**

There are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of specific reasons a student might leave college before graduation. Theoretical models classify groups of variables that are assumed to relate to some general underlying causes. For example, a general feeling of fitting in might be related to fitting in in the classroom, with one's roommates, with a team member or members of a club, with faculty members, with other students in one's major, with sports fans, and so on. Any list of factors associated with student retention will only be a partial list. The specific factors affecting retention decisions at colleges and universities vary from institution to institution and according to gender, age, and ethnicity. The following groupings are selected factors that are often looked at when doing retention studies of traditional residential students. When these factors are viewed positively by students they enhance retention, and when viewed negatively they decrease retention. Some of the factors that seem particularly important for minority and nontraditional students are noted here.

**Background Variables.** These include parental support, parents' education, parents' income, educational goals, precollege academic success (high class rank, grade point average, standardized test scores), college preparatory curriculum, and friends attending college. For minority students, background variables include extended family support, church and community support, and previous positive interracial/intercultural contact, and for nontraditional students they include spouse support and employer support.

**Organizational Factors.** These include financial aid, orientation programs, rules and regulations, memberships in campus organizations, involvement in decision-making, housing policies, counseling, the bursars office, ease of registration, and staff attitudes

toward students. For minority students, organizational factors include role models in staff and faculty, a supportive environment, at least 20 percent minority enrollment, and not viewing rules as oppressive. For nontraditional students, parking, child care, campus safety, availability of services after hours, evening/weekend scheduling, and cost per credit hour are factors.

**Academic Factors.** These include courses offered, positive faculty interaction (both in class and out of class), advising, general skills programs (e.g., basic skills, study skills, math, and English tutoring/help centers), campus resources (e.g., computer, library, athletic, college union), absenteeism, certainty of major, and academic integration. Factors affecting minority students include warm classroom climate and faculty role models, and those affecting nontraditional students include the expectation for individual faculty member attention.

**Social Factors.** Among the social factors affecting retention are close friends on campus, peer culture, social involvement (e.g., service learning, Greek organizations), informal contact with faculty, identification with a group on campus, and social integration. For minority students, social factors also include a positive intercultural/interracial environment and at least 20 percent minority enrollment.

**Environmental Factors.** These include continued parental support, little opportunity to transfer, financial resources, significant other elsewhere, family responsibilities, getting married, and a job off campus more than twenty hours per week. Factors affecting minority students also include the availability of grants.

**Attitudes, intentions, and Psychological Processes.** These include self-efficacy as a student, sense of self-development and self-confidence, internal locus of control, strategies of approach, motivation to study, need for achievement, satisfaction, practical value of one's education, stress, alienation, loyalty, sense of fitting it, and intention to stay enrolled. For minority students, self-validation is also a factor.

## **Enrollment Management and Programs to Increase Retention**

Student retention is valuable to institutions because it assures a continued flow of revenues into the institution through the payment of tuition. It is also important for public institutions because institutional support is based on the size of the student body. *Enrollment management* provides continuity to the policies and programs that result in student retention. Enrollment management activities include attracting the right students, providing financial aid, easing the transition to college through orientation programs, using institutional research to gather and analyze data about students, using appropriate interventions for students lacking skills or needing guidance, conducting research to identify the factors associated with student retention, helping with job placement, and enlisting the support of alumni.

*The Strategic Management of College Enrollments* (1990), by Don Hossler and John Bean, describes the enrollment management process in some detail. Before the term was coined, however, programs to enhance student retention were already in place. Some of the more common ones are:

- Early outreach programs (into high school or junior high) to develop students' academic competencies.
- Bridge programs that provide study on campus between high school and college.
- Orientation programs to ease the transition to college that contain academic strategies, social support, and information about campus life.
- Programs for parents so they understand student life.
- First-semester courses that continue orientation and provide support and information about campus and freshmen interest groups.
- Advising and psychological or social counseling.
- Academic skills development (basic skills, time management, tutoring, course-specific skills).
- Monitoring students for early warning signs and intrusive counseling/advising.
- Social programming for informal socializing (parties, dances, mixers, community programs), and physical places for socializing (unions, lounges, places to eat, study areas that allow talking in libraries).

- Campus development (students interacting with administrators, faculty, and staff to improve the campus environment).
- Participation in campus organizations and activities.
- Programs celebrating cultural diversity, including events of particular interest to diverse groups.
- Sensitivity to ethnic and racial issues.
- Exit interviews.

## Reentry Made Easy

It is unlikely that an institution can find a single, simple program that increases student retention, or that a single identifiable group is responsible for low retention rates. The application of resources to any student retention program has ethical implications because it favors one student or group of students over another. To be fair to all students, institutions must engage in ethical analysis before applying resources to any retention program. A central part of this analysis is that all groups of students be identified and included.

**See also:** [COLLEGE AND ITS EFFECT ON STUDENTS](#); [COLLEGE SEARCH AND SELECTION](#).

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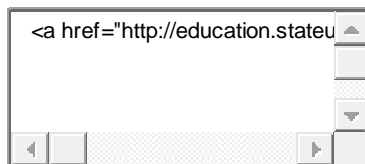
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