Developing a Sustainable Student Retention and Success Program
By: Marguerite Dennis

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) 21.6 million students are currently enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States. While approximately half of these students will graduate from the postsecondary institution at which they first matriculate, approximately 30 percent will leave within their first year. The national average six-year graduation rate is 64 percent at private schools and 53 percent at public schools. These statistics have not changed in decades.

The current national and worldwide financial situation has made the earning of a college degree more important than ever. A November 14, 2011 Time magazine article on upward mobility in the United States reported that wages have stagnated in real terms since the 1970s; for the first time in 20 years, the percentage of the U.S. population that is working is less than that in the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands. Social mobility, at the heart of the American dream, has slowed to a standstill. The article acknowledges that education has always been the fastest way up the socioeconomic ladder. The disparity between the unemployment rates of high school versus college graduates is evidence of the economic return of a college education: the rate is 14 percent for high school graduates compared to only 4 percent for college graduates.

The recession and continuing high unemployment in the United States have affected the way in which families and students choose colleges and universities. Mounting evidence indicates that for many families—including the wealthy—cost is the determining factor in the college selection process. Increased enrollment at community colleges and public institutions constitutes further evidence of this trend. All but the elite universities will be negatively affected. High-tuition schools without a national brand will be most affected.

Federal and state governments as well as accreditation boards and financial rating services will continue to examine college and university students' rates of academic progress. The business model utilized by higher education in decades past is no longer sustainable. Neither is admitting more students from out of state or from around the world sustainable. Nor is a discount rate exceeding 40 percent sustainable.

Demographic shifts, outdated and unsustainable higher education business models, fiscal challenges and the involvement of federal and state governments have made student retention and success a priority for most schools. Indeed, it is clear that student retention and success are two of the most significant challenges facing U.S. higher education today. Despite the abundance of retention research and an army of consulting firms promising the “silver retention bullet,” most college and university faculty and administrators still struggle to respond to the basic question of what causes a student to remain at or to leave school.

There are no reliable national or state-level statistics regarding what happens to students after they leave a college or university. Do the students simply drop out of school, or do they transfer to another college or university and, eventually, graduate? (I believe the second question is plausible.) If students in fact are transferring and eventually graduating from other colleges, does this suggest that they were successfully retained—just not at the first college at which they enrolled? Transfer statistics suggest that rather than dropping out of higher education altogether, students are transferring to other schools in the hope that their educational, economic and social needs will be met. At many schools, up to 30 percent of the first-year class transfers out. What does that statistic suggest about colleges' and universities' marketing and admission programs? What do first-year students experience (or not experience) that results in their expectations not being met?

Several fundamental issues related to retention and student success contribute to the disappointing statistics. First, at many colleges and universities, retention and student success efforts do not begin with marketing and admissions; neither do they include those members of the admissions or enrollment management staff who have primary responsibility for student enrollment. How many retention and student
success plans “loop back” to admissions counselors? How many counselors know which students successfully completed their first year? Do they have a profile of the “typical” first-year student who persists—or, for that matter, of the student who is likely to withdraw during the first year? How many strategic enrollment management plans account not only for who was admitted and enrolled but also for who was admitted, enrolled and successfully completed the first year?

Typically, no single administrator is empowered to implement a strategic retention and student success plan. It stands to reason that a successful plan should include the academic side of the enterprise as well as enrollment management and student services. Who is the best person to coordinate the functions of these disparate components? Many consulting firms (and a significant portion of the research) allot responsibility for retention and student success to the provost’s office or to enrollment management or student services. I maintain that the responsibility should be assigned in accordance with the institution’s culture and “personality.” What is essential is for the institutional president to empower whoever “owns” retention and student success to implement a plan; this individual (or office) must have the personality and administrative skills to unite staff in the effort to attain the plan’s objectives.

Too much data can immobilize a retention plan; too few data can make it impossible to develop an effective and efficient plan. And too often, institutional efforts are devoted to research that cannot be translated into actionable activities.

Too many colleges and universities fail to invite student input into the creation of retention and student success plans. There is little or no understanding of the “digital natives,” who learn differently and have different expectations from the baby boomers or Generation X staff who typically write the retention and student success plans.

There is not a lot of magic involved in creating a sustainable retention and student success plan. If administrators truly know which types of student best “fit” their institutions; if all of the academic and administrative functions necessary for a successful plan are involved; if a plan is based on actionable research; and if individuals are willing to change their behavior and assess the program and make necessary changes, then the program will be successful. At the very least, it will have a better chance of being successful. Most important of all is for the plan to be student centered.

How do colleges and universities define student success? Is it best measured in terms of the number of credits first-year students complete? Or is it better measured by the number and percentage of first-year students who progress to their second year? Is student success determined by the number and percentage of students who graduate? By the number and percentage of alumni who contribute to the institution? (Connecting a sustainable retention and student success plan with alumni contributions is controversial... but is it unreasonable to expect that a satisfied student will be more likely to contribute after graduation?)

A new and different approach to retention and student success is organized chronologically, from pre-enrollment through graduation. Successful programs are defined by the following essential elements:

- Questions asked by parents and prospective students prior to enrollment;
- Questions asked by presidents about retention and student success;
- Involvement of a specified number of faculty and staff in creating the plan;
- Clearly defined tasks to be completed by the retention and student success committee at mid-semester, at the end of the first semester and at the end of students’ first year;
- Post-enrollment activities during the first two weeks of each semester;
- Active involvement by faculty;
- Completion of specified financial aid tasks by students and parents;
Technology and social media efforts;
A foundation in research;
Involvement by career services;
An effective advising manual;
A clearly defined role for assessment;
Active involvement by key players in retention and student success; and
Avoidance of common pitfalls in developing a retention and student success program. (Dennis 2012).

Sustainable business models do not include shrinking the “education pie” or slashing budgets and reducing staff; rather, they include new programs at both the graduate and the undergraduate level. “Growing the pie” also should include increased retention of students who enroll.

Consider retention and student success in another way. Do the math: How many tuition dollars are lost each semester and each year as a result of student withdrawals? How much does it cost to recruit, enroll and replace even one student who leaves? How many colleges and universities could solve their financial problems at least in part by retaining more of the students they enroll? How involved and supportive are budget office staff in efforts relating to retention and student success?

Today’s college students—whether “millennial” or “adult learners”—are focused on the return on the investment in their college education. Students and their parents want some assurance that earning a college degree will help them obtain employment interviews after graduation or admittance to a good graduate school. Future education “customers” will want more—not fewer—services from their schools.

Recruitment has become a four-year activity, with students purchasing one semester at a time. So-called “re-recruitment” activities should begin immediately after acceptance and enrollment: Each semester, students must be convinced of the relevance of what as well as where they are studying. Assessment of all activities related to enrollment, academic progress and graduation will continue to increase.

Any of the following may help increase a school’s retention and student success rates: identifying the type of student best suited to benefit from what the school has to offer; having the courage to tell prospective students and their families that they cannot afford the cost of attending the school; involving the entire campus in a retention and student success plan; breaking down academic and administrative silos; and granting one person the authority to change practices that hinder student success.

There is no quick fix to any school’s retention and student success problems. Nor is there (and neither should there be) a single organizational model that can be implemented at all colleges and universities. Different student cohorts require different kinds of outreach.

Retention and student success are not the responsibility of one designated administrator; rather, they are the responsibility of faculty and administrators who must work together to achieve strategic retention goals. At many colleges and universities, politics make it difficult or even impossible to successfully implement a plan; at other schools, administrative and faculty silos are so rigid that success is difficult to achieve.

The core mission of a college or university is to educate (and, perhaps, graduate) the students it admits and enrolls. Not all students will graduate from the school at which they first matriculate. But many students eventually will graduate from some college or university. Someday a national tracking system may indicate that as a country, we are graduating more than 50 percent of the students who enroll in higher education.

Every institutional representative—trustee president, provost, academic vice president, dean, treasurer, department chair, faculty member, and enrollment and student services staff member—must be involved in and committed to the success of each admitted student. Such commitment will require the blurring of
responsibilities and the end of silos and so-called “turf battles.” Successful retention and student success plans center on what is best for students, not on what (or whether) power is gained or lost by a particular department or administrator.

Retention and student success are not easy issues to fix. Nor do I mean to oversimplify what can be complicated and politically charged. Research, personal experience, and a measure of objectivity and practicality suggest that at a minimum, modest improvements in student retention and academic progress can be realized. Maximum progress will be realized by the plan that is student- as well as parent-centered and that calls on every part of the academic enterprise to contribute to students’ academic success and progress.

Expect resistance. It is not easy to change the pervasive “business as usual” mentality. It is easy to be overwhelmed by research and data and to feel frustrated by a perceived lack of progress. It also is easy to take shortcuts—to include implementing a program that lacks individualization. Steady movement in the right direction will result eventually in the realization of strategic goals—goals that should be adopted and celebrated by every member of the institution. Ultimately, success should be measured according to the impact on the educational experience of each student.

References

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