Changing Who Stays and Who Goes: Inclusive Approaches for Increasing Student Retention

Anne Koellhoffer 18 November 2016

As an associate at a search firm specializing in higher education, many of the conversations we engage in while meeting with members of campus communities across the country revolve around questions of diversity, inclusivity, and student retention. While many colleges and universities are becoming experts at recruiting students from underrepresented backgrounds, most campuses appear to be struggling with establishing inclusive environments and retaining these same students through graduation. The search for programs and policies to impact retention rates of underrepresented students, therefore, is becoming a priority on more and more campuses. My research, however, concludes that there is no "silver bullet" to solving this issue; that is, no single program will drastically change retention numbers. Instead of looking for particular programs, I recommend that institutions looking to change their student retention rates should seek leadership that: approaches student retention as an issue that involves all members of the campus, especially members of the faculty; uses a "multi-

levered" approach rather than seeking a single remedy; reviews the existing literature and utilizes programs that have had positive impacts at similar institutions; and commits to experimentation and proactively tracking, evaluating, and analyzing their programs to contribute to this body of knowledge.

While a robust body of research examining various characteristics of students and their impact on the likelihood of degree obtainment exists, less research has been conducted on what steps colleges and universities can take to influence the outcomes that these characteristics predict. Characteristics such as family economic status or parental degree obtainment may be useful in identifying students at higher risk of dropping out, but this knowledge alone does not reduce these likelihoods. Instead, it is necessary for higher education administrators to recognize this fact and commit to taking concrete steps to enact programs and policies that will increase retention rates of underrepresented students.

The following article examines the limited existing literature and attempts to summarize what has been discovered so far, both in terms of what types of programs and policies have had a positive impact at various types of institutions, but also, more generally, how administrations should approach the issue at their own campuses to have the greatest effect. We'll begin by reviewing the myriad of reasons why we, individually and as a society, should care about retention of

underrepresented students. This is followed by an examination of current research and broad conclusions, and a set of recommendations for approaching this issue. Practically, the goal of this research is to provide sound recommendations to leaders in higher education as to how to approach the issue of retention rates in the most effective and efficient ways. College and universities, even the wealthy ones, are constantly facing resource allocation restraints; therefore, it's essential that members of leadership know how best to allocate the resources available for retention management most effectively.

Why should we care about retention?

Retention policies need to be a focus of all college and university administrations for a variety of reasons, moral and economic, as well as individual and societal. At a basic level, experts have proclaimed that by accepting a student a college or university has an obligation to ensure that that student receives the support necessary to obtain his or her degree.[1, 2] If a degree is not obtained, they are actually doing harm to their students, as those who leave without a degree still often have significant debt (this topic will be discussed in greater detail below). Student retention also ties in strongly with morally based conversations about equal opportunity, an American value. This is because retention is an issue that disproportionally affects historically underprivileged groups, including racial minorities, those with lower socio-

economic statuses, and first-generation students. In fact,

"As important as it is for minority and low-income students to go to college, it is perhaps equally important for them to attain a degree....While 32 percent of Whites and 40 percent of Asian Americans attained a BA within six years ...only 17 percent of Blacks and 19 percent of Latinos did so. Similarly, students whose parents had a high school diploma or less earned four-year degrees at a rate of 16 percent, while 61 percent of those whose parents had advanced degrees completed a BA."[1]

Other authors' work supports these discrepancies as well. As referenced in the below table, one recent study found that one's family income range had a dramatic effect on degree obtainment, with highest incomes faring best and low incomes faring worst.[3]

Income Range	**Low-income**	**Lower-middle income**	**Upper-middle income**	**High-income**
Degree Obtainment	46.0%	55.6%	62.1%	70.2%

Another found that these differences even persist at top-tier institutions, which often pride themselves on high retention rates, as students from the lowest socioeconomic status graduate at a rate of only 76% compared to 90% of students from the highest socioeconomic status.[4] Even within socioeconomic classes, racial influences persist. Within groups of low-

income families, for example, about 33% of White students obtain a bachelor's degree by age 25, compared to only 18% of Blacks and just 10% of Latinos in this income group.[5]

In fact, racial minorities continue to not only enroll at lower rates, but to drop out at higher ones. As is clear in the below table, racial minorities graduate at lower rates than their make up in the college populations:[2]

Race	African American	Latinos	Native Americans
Percent of Freshmen	7.8	8.3	0.8
Percent of Graduates	11	6.3	0.6

Although these numbers are slightly dated (from 1997), additional research suggests that the divide has not improved over time, but has actually increased in recent years.[1] Because of these facts, institutions of higher education have a moral obligation to evaluate their practices to determine what might be done to increase equal degree attainment outcomes.[3] By choosing not to address student retention, a college or university choses to perpetuate inequality.

If institutional leadership is not swayed enough by moral concerns, retention is also an important issue to study due to its impact on a variety of economic levels, from the global to the individual. Low retention rates have negative

economic impacts society-wide; the skills higher education provides are becoming more critical to workers' competitiveness in both long-established and developing economies.[3] This is especially relevant as it is predicted that nearly two-thirds of new jobs in the next decade will require at least some college education.[6] The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has suggested that:

"the United States has lost its historic edge in adults with a college degree. Particularly with respect to adults aged 25-34, the United States currently ranks twelfth globally at 41.6%. The United States also has the lowest graduation rates among those students who actually enroll in college as compared with other developed nations."[6]

The proportion of a population with degrees is key to the country's economic competitiveness as a qualified workforce is essential to maintaining an economic edge globally. As is seen by this data, the U.S. is falling behind Europe and much of Asia in terms of the percentage of the population with degrees.[7]

Retaining underrepresented students is especially important for America's economic competition as our society is headed towards a majority minority demographic reality.[1] Therefore, ensuring that racial minorities obtain degrees directly affects the preparedness of the American workforce holistically.[6]

Additionally, experience working in diverse, multicultural environments is an economically vital skill, as an ability to work in a diverse setting and being open to new ideas is essential in the new economy.[6] Therefore, decreasing the number of minority students who drop out will not just benefit those students individually, but rather will benefit the entire student population and future workforce.

Institutions of higher education themselves have economic concerns, as well, with many for-profit, two-year, and less selective institutions having the most to worry about. Graduation rates vary drastically by institutional type, as can be seen in the below table.

Institution type	**4-year public**	**4-year private**	**2-year public**	**2-year private**
Degree obtainment	57%	65%	20%	51%

Rates also vary by selectivity, with open enrollment universities averaging 34% completion rates and the most selective institutions averaging 89%.[8] More selective institutions also tend to be wealthier, clearly highlighting how retention has a larger financial impact on less selective and public colleges, as compared with their private counterparts. These negative economic effects include: reducing stability of enrollment and its effect on institutional budget projections; perceptions of quality, which may contribute a lower yield and less tuition income; and additional resources being spent on

recruiting new students to replace those who leave.[9] Finally, retention rates affect college rankings; U.S. News, for example, weighs retention rates between 20 and 25% of their total score.[10]

On the individual level, a bachelor's degree is increasingly becoming a necessity, allowing greater access to the job market and its related significantly higher earning potential.[3] Numbers released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2015 listed below show the drastic impact degree obtainment has on weekly income.[11]

Degree	High School	Some College	Associates	Bachelors	Mast
Weekly income	$678	$738	$798	$1,137	$1,34

Other studies have even found that those with degrees "had a longer life expectancy with fewer health problems, and that they smoked less, drank less alcohol and had healthier diet," all of which can contribute to healthier finances, as well as a higher quality of life and increased civic engagement.[12]

In addition to these benefits, there's also the cost of higher education to consider. Students who start college but do not graduate are required to repay their loans but without the economic boost of a degree.[13] Collectively, estimates of these costs are simply staggering. In a study of the members of the entering class of 2002, those who did not obtain degrees lost an estimated $3.8 billion per

year in income.12 Student loan debt can also accumulate to the macroeconomic level. Although extensive research does not appear to have been conducted, the New York Federal Reserve recently provided data suggesting “a macroeconomic drag” caused by student loan debt, as those with high debt loads were less able to make major purchases, such as cars or homes.[13]

To summarize, retention is an issue that has widely reverberating implications. Low retention rates not only indicate a moral failure on the part of an institution, but students with incomplete degrees carry high debts and are underprepared for the workforce, leading to negative economic impacts on the global scale. Clearly, increasing student retention is an activity that will have wide ranging positive impacts.

Current research and how we got here

As mentioned at the opening of this study, the most glaring problem preventing retention programs from being implemented effectively and efficiently is that research has not been done broadly enough nor implemented rigorously enough to determine in a scientific way what approaches work best for different student populations. Therefore, institutions looking to implement programs don’t have strong data to reference in laying their plans. However, advances are being made in the field as to how the issue is approached; in the 1960s and 1970s, students who dropped out were seen as doing so because of

innate personal characteristics and skills and a lack of motivation. In other words, these students simply weren't trying hard enough or weren't smart enough to graduate.[4] More recently, scholars have recognized the complexity of student retention and the myriad of factors that play into a student's decision to stay or leave college.

Along with this realization, institutions of higher education began implementing programs to address these issues. Unfortunately, little is known about what exactly colleges and universities are trying or what resources they are designating for these efforts, as there has been no systematic approach to compiling data industry-wide.[14] In fact, in one recent studying surveying over 300 different institutions, only 54 demonstrated that they are putting at least some focus on the issue by designating resources and implementing programs to address retention. The remaining 250 or so schools provided no information on their programs, leaving one to wonder if anything is being done at all or, if so, if any data has been collected.[14] Additionally, in the institutions that did report back, it was very common to not calculate cost-effectiveness of their programs, preventing leadership from making decisions regarding the best allocation of resources.[9]

Finally, the research that has been conducted and compiled since the 1970s has mostly focused on students' decisions to withdraw from college, not why they've chosen to stay; these decisions are not mirror images of each other.[15] What is necessary, and

unfortunately does not yet exist, is a comprehensive set of data providing guidelines for which programs or policies might be most effective with different student populations and in various educational settings.[4]

Broadly drawn conclusions from existing research

Although a database where institutions could look for successful programs at similar institutions does not yet exist, several overarching themes can be distilled from the small body of work that has been conducted thus far. One such observation regards the importance of faculty involvement with student retention. While retention is often viewed as a concern of student affairs, admissions, and administration more generally, it is a student's academic experience that motivates their attendance in the first place. Many studies show that faculty involvement has a greater influence on retention that even levels of funding and the selectivity of the institution.[9] Specifically in the first year, studies have found that GPA was the best predictor of persistence to sophomore year.[16]

Administrations cannot simply propose the idea that faculty take on a major role in retention, however, as on many campuses, faculty are already overburdened with teaching, research, and other service demands. Many do not see retention as being high on their list of priorities, if it is there at all. While faculty often place student well-

being highly, they typically do not understand their role in influencing retention on an individual basis, but rather tend to see retention issues as a matter of admitting under-qualified students.[17] Instead, administrators must try to create a culture of retention; by understanding and believing in the importance of their involvement in retention programs, faculty will likely be more open to change and enthusiastic to participate in the process.[18]

To ensure that faculty members are engaged, administrators can take a variety of actions. First, leadership can consider pushing for tenured full professors to teach some of the mandatory freshman courses. These faculty members are experienced teachers, and may be the best to help transition students from high school to higher education.[9] While research clearly shows that the first year is the most critical one in which students decide to stay or drop out, many institutions continue to have their large, mandatory first-year courses taught by adjuncts and teaching assistants.[17] This shift in teaching responsibilities may be one of the most effective steps for which an administration can advocate. Leaders can communicate the importance of this to faculty in many ways, including emphasizing teaching skills and demonstrating their support by providing professional development opportunities in this area. Leadership can go a step further by highlighting these values as early as the hiring process and continuing the emphasis through new faculty

orientation.[9] Each of these steps will contribute to a positive culture focused on student retention.

The importance of involving many members of the faculty also carries through to involvement with diversity plans, because, as has been mentioned, retention disproportionally affects students from underrepresented backgrounds. Many campuses, especially those that are on the smaller side, have a diversity "ringleader" or a dean of diversity who almost always leads the charge on these issues. Instead of relying on this individual, a successful diversity plan will involve the entire faculty. If a plan is devised by only a small subset of the faculty, this group will never have the influence needed to execute a new campus-wide vision.[17] As Christina Paxson, president of Brown University, put so precisely, "if faculty don't own an issue, it's impossible to make progress on it.... [I]f there's one lesson for college presidents, it's that."[17]

Although faculty involvement may have a strong impact on student retention, one approach alone to this issue is not sufficient; retention is a complicated issue that requires a complex response. Administrations need to incorporate a few different programs that may be effective within the context their own institutions, both to approach the problem from a variety of angles and to help create a culture of retention throughout campus.[9]

Rather than trying approaches at random, institutions should review the small body of research that has been

conducted to identify programs that have been effective at institutions that look similar to their own. For example, early studies seem to indicate that financial aid support works especially well at four-year institutions.[3] Mentorship programs have supporting evidence that indicates their effectiveness at community colleges,[19] as does improving curricular structure.[20] Other studies show that offering advising sessions and classes in the evening or on weekends, offering block scheduling to minimize travel time and costs, and investing in an office of family services to support students holistically all have positive impacts on retention of commuter student populations, which are highest at two-year and public institutions.[9] These results all support the notion that context is key to program effectiveness. By examining this research, administrations will be better armed to experiment with a few programs that show the most promise at institutions most similar to their own.

Finally, once institutions have committed to involving faculty members and testing additional programs that might work best with their student populations, institutions of higher education must also acknowledge the importance of tracking, evaluating, and analyzing program outcomes. Types of assessment should include a range, from a focus on the individual student to aspects of the larger campus culture.[21] While a statistically randomized approach may not comply with ethical standards, there is still much that can be learned through

strenuous and thoughtful evaluation.[22] First, evidence teams can be formed with many members of the campus community. Members of the teams can focus on the data collected both from specific programs and the student body more generally, focusing on disaggregating the data by race and/or income levels, which will enable them to see the disparities that exist and which approaches might best address them.[23] Members of the team can then become advocates for change within the community. The process is likely to build alliances between faculty, staff, and students as well, all of which contributes to a campus-wide culture of retention.[16]

Assessment also shouldn't be a onetime occurrence. Following initial assessment, institutional leadership should continue to push for evaluation as programs are tweaked and student demographics shift. Additionally, special attention should be given to calculating the cost-benefit ratio of various programs. While experimentation will be key to finding which programs are most effective on a particular campus, the long-term approach should be to focus on the programs that have the greatest impact using the smallest budgets, allowing a school to reserve a small amount of funds for continued experimentation from time to time.[9] Not only will institutions find such self-assessment useful, funders may actually demand such accountability; today's donors, more than ever in the past, want to be sure that their investments are paying off and have a significant impact.[12] Thus, rigorous evaluation has

multiple benefits and should be a hallmark of any retention program.

Recommendations

Although the road to degree attainment is complex, this should not deter leaders in higher education from taking on the challenge.1 While there is no “silver bullet” for solving issues of retention, reviewing the literature and previous studies has shown that there are several, generalizable approaches that may prove meaningful. Members of a board, a search committee, or an administration itself should seek leadership that:

- focuses on approaching student retention as an issue that involves all members of the campus, especially faculty;
- implements a variety of programs that are likely to be effective within their own student populations by referencing prior research at similar institutions; and
- commits to experimentation and proactively tracking, evaluating, and analyzing (using both quantitative and qualitative data) their programs to contribute to this body of knowledge, as well as to tweaking programs to best fit the needs of their own unique student populations.

By approaching retention in this manner, institutions of higher education will be able to make a bigger and more scientific impact on student retention. This work will not

only enable more students to obtain degrees, but these efforts will help ensure that students are economically successful and culturally engaged citizens, and that America's future workforce is prepared and remains competitive in an ever more globalizing world.

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