

## **Making the Case for the Importance of Student Retention:**

Student retention is one of the more interwoven and intricate issues of modern higher education. One of the primary questions I regularly field regarding student retention is, “How do we get people to care about the issue?” and when asked why student retention is an important issue, my thoughts automatically shift to the fact that retention can affect every aspect of higher education. At its core, the retention of college students is a complex issue, representing an interplay of personal, institutional, and societal factors, with likely associated detrimental costs and implications to all three audiences (Brunsdon, 2000).

From the student perspective, involuntary withdrawal because of academic failure or inability to cope with the demands of the educational system lowers self-confidence and self-esteem and likely represents a negative lifelong economic impact. From the institutional perspective, attrition is considered a waste of university resources, especially in an environment of limited financial and general resources. Attrition also potentially damages the reputation of an institution, creating long-term implications for attracting new students (Ozga, 1998). When individuals do not achieve their full potential, this represents wasted talent not only for the individual but also for society as a whole, which does not derive from benefit their development through further education.

I have found that using this three-pronged argument (personal, institutional, and societal impact) is very helpful in gaining buy-in from even the most skeptical. Once explained, the integral nature of student retention makes for a quite compelling argument.

### **Prong #1: Personal (student) impact:**

For students, failure to persist often is tantamount to failure to attain personal and financial success. For example, the median U.S. weekly salary in 2003 for a person with some

college but no degree was \$622, and the associated average unemployment rate was 5.2%. That was compared to an average weekly salary of \$900 and an associated average unemployment rate of 3.3% for a person with a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003). Further, a student who begins but does not earn the desired postsecondary credential is unlikely to recoup a significant benefit from the fiscal investment. Bean (1990) further discussed this financial reality:

“For individuals, departure from college before graduating can represent a personal failure to achieve educational objectives, an income about 15 percent below that of contemporaries who graduate from college, and the opportunity cost of an investment that will yield little financial benefit” (p. 170).

In addition to the direct fiscal impact, attaining a higher education often is essential for long-term social and occupational success. A college degree is necessary for entry into many occupations, and its absence represents a potential barrier to both fiscally rewarding and more socially valued positions. Tinto (1987) summarized the individual realities of retention as follows:

For individuals, the occupational, monetary, and other societal rewards of higher education are in large part conditional on earning a college degree. It is commonly recognized that a college degree, especially a four-year degree, is an important certificate of occupational entry without which access to prestigious positions in society becomes measurably more difficult. For some occupations – for instance medicine and law – it is frequently a prerequisite for entry established by formal regulations (p. 1-2).

Individuals who have attained a bachelor's degree typically can expect to experience significantly higher lifetime earnings when compared to individuals with some college education

but no degree. According to U.S. Census data, over a work lifetime, individuals who have a bachelor's degree would earn on average \$2.1 million - about one third more than workers who did not finish college, and nearly twice as much as workers with only a high school diploma. A master's degree holder tops a bachelor's degree holder at \$2.5 million. Doctoral (\$3.4 million) and professional degree holders (\$4.4 million) do even better (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

**Prong #2: Institutional Impact:**

At the institutional level, retention is a crucial economic and political issue. "For institutions, attrition represents a direct loss of tuition income and, other things being equal, a failure to accomplish their educational mission" (Bean, 1990, p. 170). In the current higher education fiscal environment, most institutions cannot afford to lose students - and their associated tuition revenues - due to attrition. Whether institutional revenue is derived directly from tuition revenue or indirectly from state governmental support, retention is a key element in fiscal solvency for many campuses. "Each student that leaves before degree completion costs the college or university thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition, fees, and alumni contributions" (DeBerard, 2004, p. 66). Furthermore, external entities (regulatory, legislative, advocacy) often scrutinize persistence rates and use this information to extol or criticize an institution.

Both internal institutional needs and external governmental pressures surrounding retention are growing in scope and importance. DeBerard explained the realities of this increasing pressure:

"Retention is increasingly important to higher education. Because of the rising cost of educating students and maintaining a high-quality faculty and staff, retention is a matter of economic survival. The U.S. Department of Education emphasized student retention

rates when it worked with Congress to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. Data indicate the retention record of most colleges for first- and second-year students is not good. The Department of Education has examined retention policies and ways to use federal money in an incentive fashion to reward programs that work” (2004, p. 31).

**Prong #3: Societal Impact:**

Attaining a college degree also is associated with additional intrinsic benefits. Watts (2001) identified several key social benefits, at both the individual and public levels, that are tied to earning a college degree. Those benefits include “decreased reliance on public assistance, increased tax revenues, lower demands on the criminal justice system, greater civic participation, better health status through improved lifestyle choices, improved parenting skills, increased entrepreneurial activity, and increased access to and use of computers and the Internet” (p. 9). Watt’s comments reinforced the earlier statement from the Institute for Higher Education Policy (1988).

High school graduation rates have shown positive progress over the past twenty years, improving approximately 7% over that period (Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2004). However, similar progress has not been realized at the postsecondary level. ACT (2004) reported that the average first-to-second-year retention rate at public colleges was 70.4% in 1988. That rate was 72.7% in 2005, an increase of only 2.3% over an eighteen-year span. The overall national retention and graduation rate statistics revealed a similar view. Lotkowski (2004) stated:

Although we have made significant advances in our high school graduation rates, improvement still is needed in our college retention rates. For example, in 1999-2000, four-year college enrollment among Caucasians was 46%, for African Americans, 40%,

and for Hispanics, 34%. However, only 55% of all undergraduates who began their studies at a given four-year institution in 1995-96 with the goal of a bachelor's degree completed that degree within six years at that same institution (including 59% of Caucasians and 41% of both African Americans and Hispanics) (p. 8).

Lotkoski's comments on the matter are important, because they reinforce the notion that college student retention still is a significant issue in need of improvement on a national level.

### **Conclusion:**

College student retention represents a significant issue at multiple levels in higher education. "The loss of students returning to campus for another year usually results in greater financial loss and a lower graduation rate for the institution, and might also affect the way that stakeholders, legislators, parents, and students view the institution" (Lau, 2003, p. 127).

Focusing on these core realities can significantly increase your ability to gain buy-in and focus on student retention.

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