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The Retention Challenge: It Can Be Met

Most institutions with large populations of commuter students and adults tend to adopt a laissez-faire posture with regard to student success. And many of these institutions are inclined to begin the process of “retention management” by surveying students who have already decided to leave. Unfortunately exit interviews are too little and too late. Retention management is proactive. It begins prior to or as close to the beginning of a student’s first term as possible, and it uses early warning devices to flag those students whose expectations may be inappropriate and to identify those students who will be only marginally involved with the institution.

The Importance of Student Expectations

Virtually all students will arrive at their institutions with particular expectations about what they will find there. These expectations are shaped by many factors, including what the institution says about itself, what other people say about it (including prospective, current, and former students), and how the institution responds to individual students. These factors work together to shape the student’s image of the institution—and simultaneously to shape a student’s expectations of his/her experiences there.

The power of these expectations is very great, for they shape a student’s initial stance toward the institution and even his/her initial reactions to it. This reaction in turn affects the experiences themselves, meaning that in many cases a student’s expectations become that student’s reality.

Many students, interestingly enough, hold rather grand expectations for the college experience, in the

The first three to six weeks of the freshman year are instrumental in determining whether a student will stay at a school or leave. These weeks provide the metropolitan university with a critical “window of opportunity” for first identifying those marginally involved students who are most likely to drop out and then reaching out to them with strategies to foster their success. To have successful retention programs, metropolitan universities must place student success and satisfaction at the center of their operations and to that end must commit themselves to a series of institutional policies, with strong academic advising being chief among them.

abstract. Students tell us, for example, that *at a minimum* they expect to experience at college:

- Satisfactory academic progress
- Clarification of career and life goals
- Successful integration into life on campus
- Good social and personal relationships on campus

These are generally held expectations, probably drawn out of culturally accepted views of the collegiate experience. And these clearly exist as expectations in the minds of many students, even when a student's prior educational experiences might not warrant such assumptions.

These grand expectations often become dramatically modified during the opening weeks of a student's first year, when the collegiate experience is no longer at a distance but under way. It is at such times that many students may experience great swings in both expectation and satisfaction. In fact, according to Astin's study, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1987*, in their first few weeks on campus, nearly one-half of all college students across the country say the chances are good that they will not be satisfied with the college they have just entered—in spite of the fact that over 90 percent of those students are in their first- or second-choice college.

These anticipated expectations are not exclusively a measure of the institution's image, of course. They may be part of a self-protective mechanism that students rely on as they create a fall-back position, should things happen not to go well for them. In such a case, they are able to place the blame with the institution rather than with themselves and say that they hadn't expected to be satisfied with it in the first place. This is often true for adult learners, in particular, who have much at stake and often feel uneasy having been removed from academic settings for longer periods than their younger fellow students.

Whatever the case, in their first weeks on campus, all students are testing their expectations, both grand and narrow, against the academic and collegiate life they are experiencing.

The University's "Window of Opportunity"—Narrow, but Clearly Definable

Given the high expectations many students hold in the abstract for their college experience, coupled with the less-than-optimum expectations many students hold for the particular university at which they are enrolled, it is not surprising that the first weeks of the freshman year are filled with opportunities to test expectations against reality. If expectations and reality mesh, the level of student satisfaction is high. If expectations and reality diverge, or if

negative expectations are fulfilled, the level of student satisfaction will be low.

It is also not surprising that these opening three to six weeks mark the time when many students begin to feel they have made a mistake and begin to decide that this particular university—and perhaps *any* college or university—is not for them. While it is very uncommon for students actually to leave at mid-term, it is around mid-term that a student begins to make a decision about transferring or dropping out completely, a decision that will be acted upon at a later time.

Once that idea has been entertained, and once the student begins feeling committed to that action, all subsequent classroom and campus activities in which the student participates become directed towards reinforcing the decision to leave rather than exploring the option to stay. So, while these students may still be physically present, they have mentally dropped out of the institution.

It is during these first three to six weeks of the term, then, that actions initiated by the institution can make a tremendous difference. These weeks constitute the critical “window of opportunity” and are essential in determining whether the student stays or leaves.

This is the moment when students’ expectations—if unrealistic—can lead them to feel frustration and dissatisfaction. This is the moment when students who need help but don’t know how to ask for it may find themselves feeling increasingly anxious and insecure. And this is the moment when students who don’t know how to seize the opportunities available to them on campus may begin to feel hopelessly out of place and lost. In other words, this is the critical time for the institution to take intrusive, proactive measures to reach students before they have the opportunity to experience these feelings of confusion, disappointment, or failure.

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The Importance of the Academic Connection

That students often *do* experience these feelings early in their freshman year is reinforced by hundreds of focus group interviews in which we have participated with incoming freshmen during the past decade. Time and time again, on campuses across the nation, students have told us that they did not know where or how to start activating their expectations. Many students do not know how to take the initiative to begin succeeding in the classroom, to clarify career and life goals, to integrate themselves into life on campus, and to establish solid personal relationships on campus.

Many students take a passive role in the face of their new environment. For example, a poor or mediocre grade on a class exam should prompt a

student to see the instructor after class, seek out tutorial or other supplemental instruction, or change study habits. But far too many students continue with more of what they were doing—or weren't doing—which is counterproductive to any kind of academic success. And as a result these students end up feeling uncertain, underprepared, overwhelmed, confused, easily distracted, and lost.

In light of this fact, the results of the Carnegie Foundation's *Survey of Undergraduates* (1986) are not surprising, nor is the report quite so alarming as some people have viewed it when seen in the context of talking with actual students. In this study, conducted at campuses throughout the country in the spring of 1984, students reported that they

- were bored in class (37 percent).
- found some undergraduate work repetitive of high school (35 percent).
- would drop out at once and take a job rather than taking the same job after graduation (41 percent).
- consider general studies irrelevant to the subjects that interest them most (39 percent).

The last finding is corroborated daily in our work on campuses as we talk with students about their academic experiences during the first year. Students are always anxious to get on with the "good stuff." We all know that by this students mean courses in their major—until they actually get into them, at which point for many their major suddenly loses its appeal, and students want to change it as rapidly as possible. Today's students are under tremendous pressure to select a major and a career. They tend to feel as though there is something wrong with them if they have not done so. This attitude leads to many hasty decisions which are later reversed and probably contributes to students' dissatisfaction, not to mention waste of their time, money, and energy.

In part, these data reflect students' feeling of alienation from what is at the heart of the institution—the subject matter in which they are engaged during their early years on campus. In addition, students feel a substantial distance between themselves and the faculty—those persons most centrally responsible for their learning. Among the respondents to the *Carnegie Survey of Undergraduates*, 40 percent said that no professors at their institution took a special, personal interest in their academic progress. And only 34 percent of the students knew professors to whom they could turn for personal advice, despite the fact that many campuses use faculty as advisors. As these data show, faculty members may not be connected to students in such a way as to have a very positive influence on students' expectations and perceptions.

The combination of these data tell us that many students do not perceive

their college or university as a place that reaches out to them. These perceptions may further support any negative expectations that the students hold.

In fact, student satisfaction with the quality of the academic side of the campus is a key variable in student retention, as has been noted in studies throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The importance of satisfaction with the academic program is even greater in a metropolitan university where the proportion of residential students is relatively low. In the absence of all the activities associated with residential life, the other elements of the collegiate experience, academics most of all, become even more central.

The Three Levels of Institutional Commitment Among Students

On any given campus, the authors find that students fall into three general categories when it comes to their level of investment in that particular institution. The first group is the *observably committed students*. These students take active steps to identify their needs. They are resourceful. They quickly learn how to work systems and how to find the person or persons who will be their advocates/mentors/guides. These students are generally visible, energetic, assertive, and achievement driven. Because they are so vocal and up-front, they receive the attention they want—and more.

The second group is composed of *students who are academically or socially incompatible with the dominant culture of the institution*. For these students, who are as visible in their own way as the first group, there is such a gap between their needs and wants, and what the institution can or will offer that the dissonance for them is very great. Most of these students either voluntarily drop out or find the institution leading them in that direction.

The third group consists of *students who are marginally involved*. Marginally involved students are generally invisible to the institution, unless special measures are taken to identify them. These students are polite and unobtrusive and, for whatever reason, shy away from any situation that would make them stand out or be noticed. These students will almost never pursue vague or impersonal invitations, such as a faculty member's invitation to "drop by my office to chat" nor respond to an announcement placed on a bulletin board inviting students to attend an activity or join an organization.

This third group is the largest of the three. It is also the group from which most dropouts come. Nationwide, within just one year after enrollment, nearly one in three college students leave the college they first entered. Yet, only about 5 percent of students are dismissed by their institution. The remaining students choose to leave on their own. In order to achieve great improvement in retention rates, institutions must target the marginally

involved students. Incidentally, marginally involved students are not necessarily marginal academically. Many campuses lose as many or more high-ability as low-ability students.

There are several classes of marginally involved students:

- those with heavy outside responsibilities (i.e., families, full-time or part-time jobs, etc.), but with a strong commitment to finishing college,
- those with few outside responsibilities and a commitment to finishing college, but not necessarily at a specific institution,
- those with few outside responsibilities and low commitment, both to finishing college generally and to the particular institution in which they are enrolled. This group is, in every sense of the word, on the periphery of the institution.

With all these marginally involved students, the institution's key to retention is early identification, early intervention, and good advising.

Key Steps for Retaining Marginally Involved Students

The first step is to identify which students fall into the marginally involved group. Because this group is likely to encompass such large numbers of students in metropolitan universities (and other institutions with large commuter populations), it is essential that some sorting mechanism be used to identify which of the students are at highest risk of dropping out. Some institutions use prior academic records as a measure of academic readiness for college; others use personality inventories to the same end.

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However, such approaches often miss students who did well, or reasonable well, in high school but lack the motivation to achieve similar success in college. Identifying these students requires a more sophisticated approach tailored specifically to the postsecondary academic situation and which will detect tendencies to drop out. Such an early alert mechanism needs to be folded into an entire system for managing retention on campus. It should identify very early in their college career any students with tendencies to drop out, so that the students may be directed towards appropriate interventions that will increase the likelihood of their being satisfied and successful and thus of their persisting on campus.

Such a system for retention management should include a means of detecting the academic motivation of students, the ease with which they are likely to make the transition to the college environment, level and type of help needed for them to be successful, and the likelihood that the student will be receptive to interventions on the part of university personnel.

Once this initial detection is accomplished, the second step is to design and deliver strategies that will foster student success, based on individual

student needs. While these strategies may vary from campus to campus and person to person—ranging from on-going orientation to programs that enlist the support of spouses, parents, or children—all successful retention programs have one thing in common: strong academic advising.

Because many students enter college with only vague notions of what undergraduate education is all about, where it is supposed to lead them, and what institutions expect of them, it is not surprising that advisors play a very central role, perhaps the *most* central role, in helping students build a meaningful academic program out of a series of isolated courses. A good advisor begins by helping a student to recognize available choices, and then to understand the implications of those choices. Beyond the academic realm, the best advisors help students get connected to the college environment; they serve as advocates, mentors, and friends.

Good advisors and good advising ought to supply some of the connective tissue that links one course to the next, one academic experience to the next. And good advising ought to counter the misperception that many students have that some courses, especially general education courses, are hurdles, objects to be gotten out of the way. Students, in fact, use that very language. They don't understand what bearing these courses have upon their education as a whole. All too often, required courses are not linked in students' minds to outcomes; their courses seem isolated, necessary for credentialing, perhaps, but certainly without any intrinsic value. Good advising and good advisors can change that misperception and misunderstanding.

Good advising, of course, depends upon an advisor's ability to understand fully the needs of individual entering students. It is often the case that many students, particularly marginally involved students, are not able to articulate their needs and are therefore unable to seek help to address those needs unless the institution intervenes.

These students may approach an advisor (if they approach one at all) in a very testing mode. For example, if a student wants some attention and doesn't really know how to go about getting it, he or she might say to an advisor, "I'm thinking of transferring." That may not be the student's intention at all, but the advisor may listen only to the surface of the statement and thus may take the student literally and say something completely unhelpful such as "Good luck!"

A good advisor listens and responds differently, of course, and uses the occasion as an opportunity to help a student articulate concerns, reservations, and expectations. This interaction can be the first of many positive steps taken to help the student become connected to the environment and gain the experience needed to make the system really work on his/her behalf.

The best advisors help students get connected to the college environment.

The quality of advising delivered on a campus is directly related to the talent and attitude of advisors, and to the kind and quality of information available to advisors about individual students, institutional programs and resources.

Institutional Imperatives for Improving Retention

Challenges facing universities intent upon improving retention include helping students develop appropriate initial expectations and then making certain that the quality of the student's experience, once he/she is on campus, is positive. These challenges require a commitment at the institutional policy level and involve the following steps:

- Developing and furthering the institution's image as a student-centered environment.
- Ensuring honest, accurate recruiting.
- Developing closer relationships between admissions and advising.
- Learning more about individual students.
- Creating programs and delivery strategies that take into account individual student needs and differences.
- Adopting the posture that
 - a. the institution and its faculty/staff are there to help students learn (which might mean helping students survive, cope, or thrive);
 - b. faculty/staff are there to help students become more independent learners;
 - c. faculty/staff do not assume that students are already at that point.
- Developing the approach that the institution will, for the most part, take the initiative in interactions with students and, as part of this process, teach students how to learn to take the initiative themselves. The goal over time would be for the institution to decrease its intrusive posture as individual students assumed that responsibility themselves.
- Committing sufficient resources (both financial and human) to ensure that the institution can help students make the critical connections during their first year to start them on the path towards academic development, personal growth, and successful transition to the particular college environment. One can think of this as "front-loading" or as putting the best up-front. Most colleges and universities "back-load" resources. They save for the upper-division students the best teachers, the most involving experiences, and any close working relationships with faculty.
- Recognizing that the main purpose of education and therefore the main business of the institution is to change people's lives. The necessary corollary is that for administrators, faculty, and staff students are not impositions on their work but rather the *purpose* of their work.

Retention Strategies: Investments in Both the Present and the Future

The institution that commits itself to these steps is the institution that will both retain and recruit more students—commuter and residential, tradi-

tional and nontraditional age. Students who find themselves in the supportive and enriching environment created by such institutional commitment, an environment that provides students with the right proportion of independence and support, will be much more likely to be satisfied with their educational experience than if such an environment is lacking. For students who absolutely must leave a university, due to finances or family obligations, the existence of a student-centered environment will serve to pull them back, once their circumstances make that possible.

When satisfied students return to their old neighborhoods—something that happens daily for large numbers of commuter students at most metropolitan universities—they will talk about their educational experience with friends, acquaintances, and co-workers and will serve as informal recruiters for the institution. Students in such a positive educational environment will also be personally fulfilled and satisfied. The student's growth, in and of itself, will be a statement about the institution's high-quality programs and services. The student's excitement about these aspects as he/she discusses them with friends and family will be the added bonus.

Since most metropolitan universities recruit new undergraduates from the same high schools and neighborhoods as in previous years, satisfied students (or even satisfied stop-outs) can have a far-reaching positive influence on target markets. Correspondingly, dissatisfied students can have a substantial negative effect. Efforts to create a retentive environment for current students, then, also serve as a very good investment in the future.

So what begins as proactive retention management in the opening weeks of a student's first term has implications which reach far beyond that student alone. But in the final analysis what is most important, of course, is what *does* happen for that individual student. For the university that achieves striking retention results is the university that puts student success and student satisfaction squarely at the center of its operations.

Suggested Readings

- Boyer, E. L. *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*. Report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.
- Noel, L. and R. Levitz. *Increasing Student Retention*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.
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