Retention and Institutional Effort: A Self-Study Framework

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This article describes a retention assessment framework as a way of helping practitioners use existing literature and research to assess how good their institutional retention effort is. It addresses the rationale for the framework, why some institutions graduate students at higher rates than predicted given the entry characteristics of its students, and how to use the framework.

This article takes readers on a journey—the journey of a research team that wanted to obtain a deeper understanding of the ways that an institution can affect the retention rates of its students. Enhancing student persistence touches almost every realm of our profession today. By sharing our “research travelogue,” we hope to give both academic colleagues and student affairs practitioners a framework from which they can plan and complete a journey of their own.

Our journey, as detailed in this article, commenced in 1994. At that time, we set out to develop a greater understanding of student retention and graduation rates. We began by replicating Astin’s (1993a)
work on the relationship between student characteristics and graduation rates. Unlike Astin’s study, which focused on a range of two- and four-year colleges and universities, we chose to focus exclusively on Land Grant, Research I, and AAU universities. We chose this group for one primary reason: in recent years they have faced withering criticism for their “poor performance” with undergraduate students. Using hierarchical logistic regression, and the background characteristics of a cohort of first-time full-time freshmen, we developed predicted graduation rates for these institutions.

In the next stage of the journey, we carried our work on predicted graduation rates a step further and added 22 institution-level variables to the mix. A second regression equation was developed, and predicted graduation rates were calculated using both student and institution-level characteristics. What we found was that—controlling for differences among levels of student preparation—some institutions were graduating students at higher than predicted rates (based on student and institution-level characteristics), while others were graduating students at lower than predicted rates.

As we thought about the results of the first two phases of our study, we began by asking the question, “Why?” Why were some institutions doing better than predicted at graduating students, while others were doing less well? Traditionally, studies of retention and graduation rates have tended to focus on the factors or conditions that affect retention. We decided to think about things from a different perspective, and to focus on understanding the dynamic interaction that occurs between students and institutional culture (Tinto, 1997). Current literature in the field identifies several interaction variables that might account for the observed under-or over-performance in graduating students. Hence, our attention turned to the question, “How?” How can institutions better understand the interaction impacting on graduation performance? Through this process, we developed the Retention Self-Study Framework.

In this article, we will take you, step-by-step, on our journey. We will begin by providing you with the foundation for our journey—an overview of the research that has been done on student retention and graduation rates. We will follow this with a chronicle of the initial phases of our journey—namely, our experiences developing the
National Graduation Rate Study. We will walk you through the process by which we developed the Retention Self-Study Framework, and we will describe the framework. We will conclude by discussing lessons we have learned on our journey, and by offering areas for future exploration.

Overview of Retention Research

The past two decades have witnessed a marked increase in studies of student retention and graduation rates. Driven initially by declines in student enrollment and, more recently, by an external push for institutional accountability, these studies have sought to provide insight into why some students persist and graduate, and others do not. The goals of this research have been twofold: first, to help researchers better understand student departure; and second, to provide direction to help minimize its occurrence (Sanders, 1997). The existing body of research on student retention and graduation rates draws on the work of three influential theorists: Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987), John Bean (1980, 1983), and Ernest Pascarella (1980). We will briefly describe the work of each.

Tinto’s (1975, 1987) model of student retention is cited in the literature as one of the most comprehensive explanations of why students leave college. His model, which draws on the work of sociologists Emile Durkheim (1951) and Arnold Van Gennep (1960), puts forth the idea that persistence is a function of the fit between a student’s motivation and academic ability and the institution’s academic and social characteristics. Accordingly, the stronger a student’s institutional commitment, the more likely that student is to persist and graduate.

A second model of student retention that has been commonly cited in the literature is that of Bean (1980, 1983). Drawing on process models of organizational turnover and attitude-behavior interactions, Bean’s model stresses the importance of behavioral intentions as predictors of persistence behavior. In Bean’s model, beliefs shape attitudes that, in turn, shape intentions. Accordingly, factors external to the institution can play a significant role in affecting student attitudes and intentions and, subsequently, their decision to persist.
A third, and final, model of retention that has been frequently cited in the literature is that of Pascarella (1980). Drawing on his own work, as well as on the work of others (Lacy, 1978; Pace, 1979), Pascarella’s model posits that persistence is a function of “the direct and indirect effects of five major sets of variables” (p. 53). In his model, student background characteristics combine with an institution’s environment to influence students’ interactions with socializing agents. These interactions, in turn, influence student effort. Thus, the greater the effort put forth by a student, the more likely that student is to persist and graduate.

The research of these three retention pioneers has helped us better understand the interactive nature of student and institutional culture. Nevertheless, the models put forth by these pioneers have tended to be linear in nature and focused primarily on the student. Does the student have the “right” background characteristics to succeed? Does the student interact with faculty members outside of the classroom? Is the student involved in cocurricular activities? The preeminence of the institution, in terms of providing opportunities and a suitable environment for students, is assumed in these models.

An alternative approach, taken in several more recent studies of retention and graduation rates (Berger, 1998; Cabrera et al., 1992; Durkin, Griffiths, & McLaughlin, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Seymour, 1995; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe 1988; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1998; and Tobias, 1990, 1992), considers the role that institutional factors play in enhancing or hindering student retention. This research has examined the ways in which an institution can adapt and respond to its student clientele. Thus, the responsibility for student retention focuses on the interaction of a set of complex variables including, but not limited to, institutional responsibility.

This approach is preferable to prior approaches for two reasons. First, it puts an end to a culture of “blaming the victim” on college campuses. Second, it provides a framework that calls for and encourages change at various institutional levels in response to lower-than-desired retention rates. As Terenzini (1987) indicates, student retention is more accurately explained by what happens to students once they have arrived on campus, rather than by what they were like prior to their arrival.
From the research that has been done on student retention, it is known that persistence is the result of a complex set of interactions that occur over time. Current theories of retention consider this set of interactions from a variety of perspectives. Some emphasize the role individual attributes play, while others emphasize the effect of the environment.

In general, this research has tended to have two primary weaknesses. First, it has not clearly explicated the dynamics of student attrition (Attinasi, 1989). That is, it has not clearly explained why it is that some students persist to graduate, and others do not. Second, it has not adequately explained the variance that exists in studies of student retention and graduation rates (Astin, 1993b; Pascarella, 1986). In the initial phases of our journey, we sought to address these weaknesses in the literature; we accomplished this by reframing our thinking, and developing a new “lens” for looking at student retention and graduation rates.

Charting a Course

Using a foundation derived from previous retention research, we began by asking ourselves the question, “How might we measure if an institution is over- or under-producing with respect to the factors and conditions that influence student retention and graduation rates?” We believed that answering this question would allow institutions to develop baseline data in their review of campus-specific retention practices. Rather than relying on an absolute value in comparison to a 100% graduation rate, institutions could measure factors impacting retention in a way that was related to their unique student and environmental characteristics.

To begin to answer our question, we decided to replicate and extend Alexander Astin’s work on the relationship between student background characteristics and graduation rates (Astin, 1993b; Astin & Dey, 1993). As noted previously, we decided to focus our efforts on a sample of Land Grant, Research I, and AAU universities. In 1994, our research team (based out of the University of Arizona’s Center for the Study of Higher Education) contacted 72 institutions that met these criteria and asked them to participate in a national study of graduation
rates (the National Graduation Rate Study). Specifically, these 72 institutions were asked to create and send a unit record file of data for their 1988 first-time, full-time freshmen cohort that included: high school GPA, class rank, SAT/ACT score, gender, ethnicity, residency, and four- and five-year persistence and graduation rates.

Two years later, in 1996, the institutions were again contacted and asked to submit the same information for their 1990 first-time, full-time freshman cohort. Usable data were received from 44 of the 72 institutions, with unit record files created for more than 130,000 students. These data were used to formulate a logistic regression equation to predict graduation rates based on students’ entry characteristics. Four- and five-year persistence and graduation rates were estimated using students’ high school GPA, SAT/ACT score, gender, and ethnicity. These estimated persistence and graduation rates were then compared with the institutions’ actual rates to determine whether that institution was graduating students at a higher than predicted rate, at a lower than predicted rate, or at capacity.

In a second phase of analysis, 22 institution-level variables were identified and collected for inclusion in the study. These variables included traditional measures of institutional quality such as the faculty/student ratio, the percent of faculty with doctoral degrees, the proportion of the institutional budget spent on instruction, the percent of students who live on-campus their first year, and the number of volumes in the library.

Because of the number and disparate nature of the institution-level variables, factor analysis was applied. Four primary factors were identified: (1) a cost factor, which loaded heavily on tuition and cost of attendance variables; (2) a size factor, which loaded heavily on enrollment and library volume variables; (3) a quality factor, which loaded heavily on student selectivity and faculty credential variables; and (4) a budget factor, which reflected ratios of budget categories. A second regression equation was formulated using these data.

What we found was that, controlling for differences in level of student preparation, some institutions were graduating students at higher than predicted rates, while others were graduating students at lower than predicted rates. When matched for similar student characteristics,
such as high school GPA and test scores, the results were similar: some institutions were graduating students at higher than predicted rates, while others were graduating students at lower than predicted rates.

Our results led us to ask, “Why?” Why were some of the institutions in our study doing better than predicted, while others were doing less well than predicted? What was going on at those institutions that were over-performing relative to their predicted graduation rate? Similarly, what was going on about at those institutions that were under-performing relative to their predicted graduation rate?

Most retention models attempt to predict the factors and conditions that are associated with persistence. We decided to think about things from a different perspective and to ask a different question—namely, “How can institutions better understand the dynamic interaction that occurs between students and institutional culture within the context of the knowledge that we already have about promoting student success?”

As we worked through this question and drew upon our new perspective, we began to conceptualize a framework that could help institutions to better understand the various factors, conditions, and circumstances that play a role in their graduation rates. It was during this phase of our journey that the Retention Self-Study Framework was developed.

**The Retention Self-Study Framework**

When we constructed the Retention Self-Study Framework, we purposefully did not want to re-invent the retention wheel. Rather, we wanted to come up with a way to represent findings from our own research, as well as from the existing body of student retention research, in an interactive, graphic format.

In developing the framework, and in defining the various factors that make it up, we drew on more than two decades of research on student retention and graduation rates, on good practices in higher education, and on good practices in student affairs. From this body of research, we identified the following four “spheres of influence” that affect an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students: (1) the charac-
teristics of students enrolled in the institution, (2) the characteristics of the institution itself, (3) academic good practices used by the institution, and (4) student services good practices used by the institution. We will briefly discuss each, in turn.

Student Characteristics
Several student characteristics have been identified as playing a role in an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students, including: the students’ family support, their socioeconomic status, their ability to pay, their interests, their prior academic preparation, their sense of commitment, and their sense of loyalty. A graphical representation of these characteristics, and others, is provided in Table 1.

Institution-Wide Characteristics
Several institution-wide characteristics have been identified as playing a role in an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students, including: having a clear mission (with policies in place that support it), having a sense of history, respecting student initiative and responsibility, having a sense of community, and valuing student learning. A graphical representation of these characteristics, and others, is provided in Table 2.

Academic Good Practices
Several academic good practices have been identified as playing a role in an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students, including: setting high expectations for students, offering students prompt feedback, providing students with opportunities to practice learned skills, encouraging students to engage in out-of-class interactions with faculty, and providing students with the opportunity to work collaboratively with other students. A graphical representation of these characteristics, and others, is provided in Table 3.

Student Services Good Practices
Several student services good practices have been identified as playing a role in an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students, including: engaging students in active learning, promoting the effi-
Table 1
Student Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>A student’s interests include his or her academic interests (e.g., science, music) and social interests (e.g., drama, sports).</td>
<td>Astin, 1964, 1971, 1977, 1993a; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella &amp; Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, &amp; Blimling, 1996.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>The amount of social, spiritual, emotional, or financial support provided to a student by his or her family.</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Bean &amp; Vesper, 1994; Boyer, 1987; Horn, Chen, &amp; Adelman, 1998; Mallinckrodt, 1988; Spady, 1970; St. John, Kirshtein, &amp; Noell, 1991.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic preparation</td>
<td>The academic preparation of a student includes the type of high school attended, the courses taken, the grade point average, the class rank, and standardized test scores.</td>
<td>Adelman, 1999; Astin, 1993a; Bean, 1980; Pantages &amp; Creedon, 1978; Spady, 1970.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>The expectations that a student holds about attending college (e.g., what the student expects to get out of college, the experiences the student expects to have in college) and about his or her abilities, strengths, and weaknesses.</td>
<td>Braxton, 1995; Chickering &amp; Reisser, 1993; Nora, Castaneda, &amp; Cabrera, 1992; Pascarella &amp; Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1970; Tinto 1975, 1987.</td>
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Table 1, continued
Student Characteristics

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<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>A student’s belief in his or her ability to accomplish a certain goal (such as graduating from college).</td>
<td>Astin, 1964; Bandura, 1977; Pascarella &amp; Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1970; Williams &amp; Leonard, 1988.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to pay</td>
<td>The ability of a student and his or her family to afford the student’s choice of college or the student’s college expenses.</td>
<td>Bean &amp; Vesper, 1992; Bowen, 1980; Cabrera, Stampen, &amp; Hansen, 1990; Christensen, Melder, &amp; Weisbrod, 1975; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Grubb &amp; Tuma, 1991; Johnstone, 1993; St. John, Kirshstein, &amp; Noell, 1991; Tinto, 1982, 1987; Ungar, 1980; Upcraft, 1999; Volkwein et al., 1994.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>The commitment that a student has made to his or her educational purpose and goals.</td>
<td>Bean, 1980; Boyer, 1987; Chickering &amp; Reisser, 1993; Nora, Castaneda, &amp; Cabrera, 1992; Pantages &amp; Creedon, 1978; Tinto, 1975, 1987; Ungar, 1980.</td>
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Student Characteristics

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<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of responsibility</strong></td>
<td>A student’s sense of his or her ability to think and act rationally and be accountable for the choices made.</td>
<td>Astin, 1993a; Boyer, 1987; Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Kuh, 1993, 1995; Pascarella &amp; Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1970.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>A student’s sense of his or her goals, plans, aims, or intentions</td>
<td>Astin, 1993a; Bean &amp; Metzner, 1985; Brookman, 1989; Chickering &amp; Reisser, 1993; Nora, Castaneda, &amp; Cabrera, 1992; Pascarella &amp; Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987.</td>
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### Table 2
Institution-Wide Characteristics

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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear mission</td>
<td>Defines what an institution aspires to be and is clear enough that any institutional stakeholder can understand it, describe it, and live it. Such a clarity provides direction to the institution in stressful times and creates a distinctive impression of the institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies support mission</td>
<td>Policies, the means by which an institution enacts its mission, are consistent with the institution’s educational purposes, values, and expectations. Students are made to feel welcome on campus and are taught how to act. They are made responsible for learning and maintaining community standards. Multiple subcommunities are supported, and resource allocation processes are driven by educational priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human scale</td>
<td>The “feel” of a campus to students is appropriate, comfortable, and manageable, such that small colleges seem larger and large universities seem smaller. The goal is to address the human need for social and psychological comfort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of history</td>
<td>Students receive important messages about their involvement through historical precedent on campus. If an institution has dealt with crises and change in ways that value student involvement, students may be inclined to carry on the tradition of influencing campus affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources model</td>
<td>Helping students reach their full potential is a central objective. This includes setting high, but reasonable, expectations for student performance. In addition, students receive messages of care and belonging on campus.</td>
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Table 2, continued
Institution-Wide Characteristics

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td>An atmosphere is created in which all students feel welcome and comfortable. Some institutions do this through minimizing differences among students, while others do so through accentuating differences. In addition, institutions use their locations to the educational advantages of their students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respect for student initiative/responsibility</strong></td>
<td>Institutions provide a degree of structure for their students to promote development of autonomy and responsibility. The degree of structure depends upon the mission, philosophy, and student characteristics of each particular institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value of student learning</strong></td>
<td>Students are valued for what they bring to campus, yet they are encouraged to grow beyond their boundaries and to sharpen their skills. In addition, the boundaries between in-class and out-of-class learning experiences are blurred.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** ACPA (1994); Boyer (1990); Kuh & Schuh (1991); NASPA (1994); Chisholm (1983); Guskin (1994); Hall & Sandler (1982); Hurtado (1992); Upcraft (1999)
Table 3
Academic Good Practices
Adapted from Kuh & Schuh (1991)

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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High expectations</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members set high, yet attainable, goals that are clearly communicated to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early years of study</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members recognize that the first years of undergraduate study—particularly the freshman year—are critical to a student’s success in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities for research and application</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members give students the opportunity to test and/or apply theories and principles through the use of hands-on experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Respect diverse styles</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members recognize the diverse talents and learning styles of their students and make an effort to use a variety of teaching methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adequate time on task</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members help students learn how to effectively manage time by underscoring the importance of regular work, steady application, self-pacing, and scheduling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Out-of-class interaction with faculty</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members interact with students outside of the classroom—including formal interactions, such as advising sessions, and informal interactions, such as attending on-campus events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members give students the opportunity to work collaboratively with other students through the use of learning groups and peer discussion groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active learning</strong></td>
<td>Faculty members give students the opportunity to take active responsibility for learning through the use of teaching methods that encourage student activity and involvement.</td>
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Table 3, continued
Academic Good Practices
Adapted from Kuh & Schuh (Involving Colleges, 1991)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to practice learned skills</td>
<td>Faculty members give students the opportunity to practice and apply core skills through the use of multiple opportunities to exercise higher-order communication (written &amp; verbal), critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and prompt feedback</td>
<td>Faculty members give students frequent, immediate, corrective, and supportive feedback on their performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesizing experiences</td>
<td>Faculty members give students the opportunity to synthesize knowledge and skills learned in different places in the context of a single problem or setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating education and experience</td>
<td>Faculty members give students the opportunity to integrate education and experience through the use of field experiences, cooperative education arrangements, internships, and hands-on applications.</td>
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Sources: ACPA (1994); Chickering & Gamson (1987); Chickering & Reisser (1993); Kolb (1984); NASPA (1994); Pascarella & Terenzini (1991); Association of American Colleges (1985); National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (1993); Ory & Braskamp (1988); Pace (1987, 1990); Volkwein, King, & Terenzini (1986)
cient use of resources to achieve the institutional mission, building supportive and inclusive communities, helping students build coherent values and ethical lifestyles, setting high expectations for students, and collaborating with other departments to promote student learning. A graphical representation of these characteristics, and others, is provided in Table 4.

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Engages students in active learning</td>
<td>Students are encouraged to bring their personal experiences into the classroom, consider others’ perspectives, and apply new ways of thinking to their own lives. Good student affairs practice provides multiple opportunities for students to engage in various learning experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborates with other departments to promote learning</td>
<td>Partners in the learning process, such as students, faculty, academic administrators, staff, and others inside and outside the institution, work with student affairs staff to develop and implement institutional goals. These partnerships have at their core the common commitment to students and their learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bases policies and practices on promising directions for research</td>
<td>Good practice in student affairs occurs when student affairs educators know and analyze how effective programs and services are in maximizing student learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes efficient use of resources to achieve institutional mission</td>
<td>Resources, both human and financial, are focused on creating and improving learning environments throughout the campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps students build coherent values and ethical lifestyles</td>
<td>Students are challenged to embrace the values that define an effective learning community—values such as honesty, justice, dignity, freedom, and civic responsibility. As well, the value of equality is actively supported.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We want to be clear that the Retention Self-Study Framework is not a predictive model. Rather, it is intended to provide institutions with a visual, graphic way of examining the student experience from a range of perspectives. The framework was created to be holistic, interactive, nonlinear, and interdependent. By using the framework, it is our hope that institutions can develop a retention strategy that is specific to their environment.

Using the Framework

In using the framework, it is important to remember that, while the framework is derived exclusively from the research that has been done on student persistence and graduation rates, on good practices in higher education, and on good practices in student affairs, not all included factors will be relevant for all institutions. We suggest that
you may want to define student characteristics, institution-wide characteristics, and outcomes (some possible outcomes are included in Table 5) for yourself, so that they may be specific to your institution. It is also important to remember that over-reliance on one set of variables, at the exclusion of others, will produce different results.

Following are several suggestions for how the framework may be applied. The list is not exhaustive, nor is it a step-by-step guide for examining your retention and graduation rates. Rather, it is intended to provide suggestions on how you can initiate a campus-wide conversation on improving the student experience, as drawn from the literature. We encourage you to be creative in thinking about how you can use the framework to look at retention-related efforts on your campus.
Use Astin’s (1993) or Kroc et al.’s (1995) regression equation to determine how well your institution is using its capacity to graduate students; draw on the framework to help understand how you can increase your graduation rates.

Present the framework to the institution-wide retention group and design an evaluation plan to determine the institution’s level of effort in relation to the framework’s features.
• Meet with your institution’s faculty opinion-shapers and members of the faculty student affairs committee to explain the usefulness of the framework in examining and understanding institutional retention efforts.
• Train student affairs staff to understand the framework and its development so they can become effective voices in discussing ways to improve student retention and success.
• Conduct campus workshops on the literature and research that informs enhanced retention efforts, using the framework as a way to organize the information.
• Meet with key academic administrators and professionals to explain the utility of the framework and to gain their support for an in-depth analysis of institutional effort.
• Use the framework as a teaching tool to jump-start a discussion on how to improve student success in meetings with students, community members, and parents.
• Use good practice inventories, such as those provided by Chickering and Gamson (1991), NASPA (1997), and others, to benchmark the level at which these principles are applied in classrooms, departments, and student affairs units.

Lessons Learned on Our Journey

The knowledge that has been gained in the past two decades has several implications for practice. We have attempted to capture this knowledge and are sharing it with you in the form of lessons learned on our journey.

Retention Has a Local Address

Retention is a socially constructed concept and, as such, must be viewed from a sociohistorical and institutional context. Its meaning is derived from the mission, policies and practices, characteristics, values, and core assumptions of our institutions and its members. Therefore, an open and thoughtful discussion of what retention means on your campus may reveal hidden meanings and conflicting purposes. On some campuses, for instance, retention is a code word for retaining the “best and brightest;” on others, it is used as a justification to decry perceptions of the inadequate preparation of students who attend the university.
You Can Only Regress so Many Variables

Retention models are useful in helping us understand some of the variables associated with persistence; nevertheless, most models account for only about 30 to 40 percent of the variance in rates. We believe that the course has been run on trying to elucidate this unexplained variance through the regression of large sets of numerical variables. Practitioners need to take into account understandings derived from the research, as well as from local conditions, to create learning communities that can enhance student success.

Retention Is Not Student Affairs’ Bucket to Carry

Student affairs practitioners often blame faculty and academic administrators for not creating the conditions that foster student development and learning. This leads to a false sense of empowerment about the role that student affairs practitioners play in creating the right conditions for growth. Student persistence is a campus responsibility; as such, each player needs to figure out its role and collaborate on meeting the responsibilities inherent in these various roles.

The Right Reasons

As practitioners, we need to understand that students will leave our institutions. We need to make certain they leave for the right reasons and not the wrong reasons. This requires better data collection on students who leave, including the tracking of these students in terms of graduation from other institutions or success in the workforce.

Reframing Our Thinking

The attendance patterns of students have changed dramatically over the past 25 years. Forty-five percent of the students attending post-secondary education today are enrolled in community colleges, 40 percent in four-year public and private colleges and universities, and 12 percent in for-profit institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Likewise, part-time students are quickly becoming the majority of students in higher education. The old template of the traditional four-year college is outdated; as such, we need to reframe our thinking to understand how we can meet student needs in multiple settings, and to learn what conditions seem to promote desired outcomes.
Understand Role of Market Forces

The rapid changes in the landscape of higher education have been driven, in part, by market forces. We should not view this condition as a passing phase, but rather understand it and decide how to utilize it in keeping the best of what we do and shedding out-dated practices and assumptions about our work. One of the enduring principles of the student affairs profession is helping students achieve success and take responsibility for their decisions and actions. This will need to be accomplished in a variety of ways because of who our students are, the changing patterns of attendance, and the changing conditions of creating and disseminating knowledge.

Adopt a Wider Perspective

Persistence is the result of a complex set of interactions that occur over time. As such, it is necessary for us to adopt a wider perspective in thinking about retention. Using the framework to evaluate one retention program or unit is not enough. If we want to meaningfully impact our retention and graduation rates, we must focus on developing institution-wide strategies. This requires an examination of how we spend our time and allocate our resources, as well as a willingness to work collaboratively with our colleagues in crossing borders between student and academic affairs.

Conclusion

The Retention Self-Study Framework is built on a vast body of knowledge and is designed to help institutions assess their own institutional efforts. Each factor in the framework is based on what we have discovered during our journey about building learning communities and enhancing student learning. The uniqueness of the framework lies in its ability to illustrate the dynamic interaction among four sets of characteristics and variables that influence persistence. Our journey, however, is not over. We continue to work toward developing and refining our framework. In addition, we have identified several areas for future research and further exploration.
Further Exploration

The Retention Self-Study Framework offers a new way of thinking about student retention and graduation rates. In particular, the framework suggests a need for research that looks at retention from a qualitative perspective. One way to better understand the interplay among the four spheres of the model is through ethnographic study.

We propose that more ethnographic studies be done that focus on the observation of classroom practices and nonclassroom interactions among faculty, students, and student affairs professionals. Specifically, there is a need to establish ethnographic evidence of patterns of student–faculty interaction (at the departmental level), patterns of student–student affairs practitioner interaction, and ways in which student cultures create educational communities. Comparing these patterns of interaction to the emerging literature on best practices will help us identify and confirm patterns that contribute to or hinder student success and graduation. We need to look beyond simple quantitative variables. Clearly, quantifiable student and institutional variables begin to help us understand graduation rates. Just as clearly, other factors, perhaps less easily measured and more idiosyncratic, are important.

It is our belief that those institutions in our study that were graduating students at higher rates than predicted were doing so because academic and student affairs good practices set them apart from underperforming institutions. As Astin commented in his 1997 article, “How Good is Your Institution’s Retention Rate?,” graduation rates alone can be deceptive in that they do not necessarily reflect how well institutions are using their capacity to graduate students. The usefulness of our framework lies in its ability to point out the obvious; that is, to remind us that we need to go beyond traditional institution-wide and student variables if we are to fully understand student persistence.

References


