Yes, Student Retention Is an Admissions Issue

Here's why you should be looking at the admissions process as a foundation for retention.

BY HOWARD AND MATTHEW GREENE

Here's an unhappy little story to which we were recently privy: A student at a selective university was asked to leave after her first year, due to academic probation. She did not handle her academic warnings appropriately, had little advising to help her do so, and ended up being separated from the university. At no time were her parents notified, and she continued to live in the college town and take extension courses through the university for another two semesters, all the while telling her parents that everything was fine. By the time they found out, she had burned her bridges with the university, and had made many other transfer opportunities untenable. Certainly, had the school proactively engaged her after her first semester of academic warning, and asked her permission to notify her parents, they might, as a team, have come up with a plan to help her succeed, or help her find a more appropriate college. Possibly, this trauma for the student—and the attrition statistic it represents for the school—could have been avoided altogether.

Recently, we wrote about the importance of student retention for admission officers seeking to increase their school’s yield during the later stages of the admission process. But let’s turn that equation around: If you’re reading this article, and you are responsible for improving student retention, shouldn’t you be considering the admission process as a foundation for retention? Attracting, admitting, and enrolling qualified, interested, motivated, and importantly—appropriate students who understand the realities of your campus culture and its academic and social demands will give you your best odds for retaining happy and successful students through graduation. Conversely, luring underprepared, disinterested, ill-informed, and inappropriate students who have been marketed a glossy view of campus and academic life will likely lead to a low sophomore retention rate, increasing attrition, and, finally, a low graduation rate.

THE UGLY TRUTH: A HARD LOOK AT THE STATS

Fundamentally, what is good for the students can be equally good for an institution. A high retention rate signifies strong campus morale, engagement, and financial well-being for the institution. A higher graduation rate, and happy and engaged alumni, are the ultimate goals. This is how institutions build their core constituency, reputation, endowment, and quality over time. Though given current demographic trends, today’s higher ed consumer base (students, parents, high schools) seems to present unlimited opportunity and security for IHEs, the increasing diversity of students (and the unevenness of their academic backgrounds) present real challenges for admission officers and administrators. Students face language, financial, social, emotional, and academic barriers to college success.

According to a recent report from the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (“The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year,” Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2001; www.woodrow.org), almost half of the 90 percent of college freshmen who expect to graduate from college had not taken the kind of rigorous or foundation college preparatory classes in high school that would help them succeed in reaching their goal. In fact, according to ACT (www.act.org), the attrition rate at the end of the first year of college averages 28 percent at public four-year IHEs, and 25 percent at private four-year institutions. At IHEs practicing open admissions, the attrition rate approaches 50 percent. Findings from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2001; www.ed.gov) show the cumulative impact of low retention rates. Only 51 percent of students who began college in 1995-96 attained a degree or certificate six years later; 14 percent were still enrolled. Sixty percent of those who began college at four-year public IHEs attained their degree in six years, while 17 percent were still enrolled. At four-year private institutions, 73 percent had attained their degree, and nine percent were still enrolled. What’s more, the impact of the loss of students on peers and on institutional budgets is enormous. So, here’s your retention challenge: How do you keep these students on campus and help them succeed? And, how do you make sure they’re the right students in the first place?

TOWARD RETENTION SUCCESS

To move toward retention success, consider—during the admissions process and beyond—the following factors (in bold), which correlate directly with student success (below each factor):

Communication between those managing the intake of students, and those responsible for their exit at the appropriate time, is essential.

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Strong academic preparation
- Students will be prepared to succeed in the college curriculum
- Students will be less likely to need remedial assistance

Commitment to the IHE and to personal academic goals
- Students will identify with their alma mater
- Students will understand the importance of earning their degree in terms of academic and career aspirations

Interaction with faculty/students in and out of the classroom
- Students will learn from professors and peers, engaging in the intellectual “life of the mind” so touted at IHEs
- Students will identify mentors, and new subjects of interest

Engagement with campus life through one or more activities
- Students will bond with their peers and communities in multifaceted ways that will tie them to the IHE and their education

Interaction with older student role models
- Students will see that success and graduation are possible
- They will learn lessons/develop tools to help them make it through

A strong advisory system for course and major selection
- Students will be guided into appropriate areas of study
- Advisors will catch students before they fall through cracks, help them maintain reasonable academic progress, and refer to campus services that may be necessary for personal/mental health

Strong teaching by knowledgeable faculty
- Students will avoid boredom that could lead to disconnection with college academic life
- They will engage in subjects that can maintain their interest and inspire them to succeed

WHO CAN AID THE PROCESS?
Administrators, faculty, and student leaders can all help with retention. And since we know that minority students are more likely to leave school without a degree, multicultural counselors can target students at higher risk of dropping out. Drug and alcohol counselors can work with students to help them before they become academically ineligible to continue their work. Financial aid administrators can proactively track down students who have not filed for aid award renewals, and colleges can develop e-mail alerts to notify students of key dates and procedures, mental health and crisis counseling services, multicultural support networks, peer tutoring programs, etc.

And despite privacy laws intended to protect students, it may be possible (within permission guidelines) to work with students and families to establish lines of communication and notify family members of academic or disciplinary problems, or a health-related crisis.

GETTING PROACTIVE
Colleges can even get in on the retention process early: An April 2003 report from the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (www.writingcommission.org) points to the need for colleges to work with high schools to make writing a major focus in the academic programs at both levels. But since two-thirds of high school graduates will go on to college today, admissions officers can improve the retention picture dramatically—with a little help from those administrators directly responsible for retention.
Together, here's what retention and admissions pros can do:
Present a realistic portrayal of institutional life. Make sure that applicants and potential applicants understand what kinds of students succeed, what support resources are available, and what the campus culture is really like.

Link admission decisions to an assessment of graduation requirements. If there is a quantitative course requirement, or language or writing requirement, will students be able to fulfill it?

Identify students at risk, and connect them with appropriate offices on campus. If a student has identified a disability, is there a process for linking that student with the disability support personnel prior to and after her arrival on campus? If a student is a member of an under-represented student population, can you connect him with peer, faculty, and administrative mentors?

Study retention and graduation rates and profiles, and integrate that information into future admission decisions. Which students are failing? Why? What are the signposts in their high school backgrounds? Conversely, who is succeeding? What lessons can you learn from their applications and preparation?

TEAMWORK
Once again, we advocate a team approach. Communication between those managing the intake of an institution's primary customer (the student) and those responsible for their exit at the appropriate time—with diploma—is essential. Too often, admission applications are sent to the shredder with no further action, while pertinent student records are never brought to the attention of the admissions officials who originally invited that student to campus. The disconnect needs to end now.

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