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Introduction

Student retention theories have been discussed and studied since the 1900s, but the proposal of Vincent Tinto’s model of student integration in 1975 sparked the modern conversation on student retention theory. “Tinto’s seminal theory created a base from which thousands of studies have proliferated in the ensuing years making undergraduate retention one of the most widely studied areas of higher education today.”

Although higher education has acknowledged these theories of sociological, organizational, psychological, cultural and economic attributes of students, they have remained largely within the realm of scholarship and research that have not substantively led to shifts in institutional practice.

For any student entering an institution—regardless of their future plans or where they currently are in their life—the ultimate goal is to acquire the credentials they need to put them on a career path or to advance their current career.

Whether the credentials are a certification in a specific field, an associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, or graduate degree, all students want a common outcome. Thus, the goal for those who work at an institution of higher education is to help students achieve that outcome.

In the past, college-bound students tended to follow a traditional, straightforward pathway to a college degree: apply, get admitted, attend, choose a major, discover new possibilities, change their major and, finally, complete their program and graduate. Institutions understandably standardized paths to accommodate this routinized progression. However, today’s institutions are dealing with students who are faced with more complex pathways to their desired outcomes and have various opportunities to leave one institution and move to another. These students face a variety of challenges from the beginning, including: their preparedness, work and life

balances and financial constraints. For most students today, their decision to go onto higher learning is linked to pursuing a very specific career path where they can receive a cost effective degree that improves their lives. This means that institutions can no longer serve the student who discerns his/her career path during their college experience, but must provide clear and easily navigable pathways for students who choose to enter and stay in an institution with a specific career path already in mind. The dominant profile of this student involves the need to balance work, family, school and finances – all while determining if the institution is a good fit and financial value. If it’s not, students will decide whether to stay at their chosen institution, and then decide if the expense, time and energy are worth the effort of achieving a degree. The capacity of the institution to meet this population’s needs and expectations means replacing standardized systems with flexible, timely and effective processes and programs.

More and more students want postsecondary credentials in order to improve their lives. Governments are increasingly holding colleges and universities accountable for producing completion results through performance-based funding models. High enrollments are no longer sufficient metrics of success – graduation rates have become the key priority in higher education. In fact, more than 75% of the states have adopted some level of performance-based funding. Some states, like Tennessee and Ohio, now have 100% of their funding determined by graduation rates. The Obama administration also recently released a draft on higher education accreditation standards with plans to rate colleges on access, affordability and student outcomes, suggesting that the transparency of student success is only going to become more important in coming years.

What has caused the landscape of higher education to change? Over the past decade, we’ve seen increased tuition costs, new technology, a struggling job market and economy, online degree options, massive open online courses, funding model changes, flipped classrooms, an increased focus on learning analytics and the more frequent admission of non-traditional learners play a role in this landscape change. Today’s students expect technology to help them with nearly everything in their day-to-day lives. They expect to receive a push notification if a class becomes available. They expect to get a text or email if there is a problem with their account. They expect to learn about campus events through notifications on their handheld devices. In addition to these technology expectations, students are not as prepared for college as they once were. Study and time management skills are low and many lack the degree of “college knowledge” that institutions traditionally expect – like knowing the financial and academic consequences of withdrawing from a class, knowing what credit hours versus credits completed or attempted are, or knowing that they should appreciate a professor’s feedback, even in the face of a low grade.

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2 http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/performance-funding.aspx
Introduction

According to Vincent Tinto, “effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve. They put student welfare ahead of all institutional goals.” Today, this requires identifying and proactively supporting students at all risk levels, coordinating workflows across functional units and providing anytime-anywhere access to programs, services and support. Many institutions are caught unprepared to deal with the influx of students who have a very different set of expectations and varying levels of college readiness that were once expected. Arguably, higher education institutions are not completely equipped to deal with these new challenges because they are not making the most of the available data to provide the insight into who their students are and what challenges they face. There is also a lack of defined strategy to determine the needed shifts in student support practices as well as the best use of resources to engage students throughout the entire student lifecycle. In order to inform efforts to improve retention and graduation rates, it is not enough to talk about the new student and bolster existing practices; rather, a specific strategy is necessary in order to use data and technology available to institutions today. Technology is a requirement needed to support today’s students.

The combination of this “new” student on campus and the shift to performance-based funding poses new challenges to higher education administrators and faculty who have that ultimate goal of helping students complete their entire education lifecycle from admission to graduation. This means that institutions must increase their graduation rates, while still maintaining academic rigor.

Blackboard Research

In working with numerous institutions to help improve their retention and graduation rates – whether two-year, four-year, public, or private institutions – the issues that were found surrounding retention and graduation rates were similar.

- No specific plan in place to address retention and graduation rates
- Too many uncoordinated, disintegrated approaches by different departments on campus
- No budget to invest in student retention programming
- Not enough staff to meet the needs of all students
- Too many unprepared students
- Technology doesn’t support efficient programming
- Inability to identify which students need help
- Inability to tell when a student changes from being low risk to high risk
- Students don’t use the resources already provided
Introduction

Retention Programming Costs—A No Brainer

While these challenges and changes are part of the reality of higher education, addressing them doesn’t have to mean breaking the budget. In fact, institutions that implement a strategy to improve retention numbers actually save money in the long run by retaining students with the right efforts in place. To find out just how much money, we used a sample institution of 15,000 students and calculated the difference a retention improvement of just 1% could make. The answer? 1.4 million dollars. The money saved from retaining students can then help pay for better student success programming, which allows the investment to come full circle.

Despite the common problems articulated, Blackboard’s research has shown that the majority of higher education administrators identify “helping students succeed” as their driving motivation for making retention a priority, with performance-based funding and other state mandates not far behind. But the biggest challenge remains: how do we help students reach their graduation goals in the face of these challenges?

To address the challenges associated with retention and graduation, Blackboard set out to collect some data of its own. Blackboard surveyed a total of 487 respondents, comprised of 398 students and 89 administrators, and segmented their responses into three institutional categories: four-year public, four-year private, and two-year community colleges. Based on this research and Blackboard’s experience in the field, the proposed fundamental solution to helping students successfully complete their degree at their chosen institution boils down to three key elements:

1. Insight
   • Leverage technology to collect actionable data
   • Interpret data to identify patterns that influence student risk as well as identify students currently at-risk
   • Use this data to make decisions about changes to policy and programming that are meaningful to an institution’s particular student body
   • Track the effectiveness of programs in order to make informed decisions about resource allocation
Introduction

2. **Strategy**
   - Establish a governance model with sponsorship from senior leadership
   - Develop a planning process that includes key academic and administrative functions involved in the student pathway
   - Create detailed goals that make the responsibility of student success a coordinated effort across key functional departments
   - Examine academic and administrative practices with a focus on the student experience to develop high impact strategies

3. **Engagement**
   - Use technology effectively to manage information and communication with students
   - Focus on meaningful student engagement throughout the entire student lifecycle
   - Communicate with students through various modes of communication: texts, emails, phone, push notifications
   - Provide students with technology that allows personalized self-help business transactions

   - Offer applicable resources to students consistently and constantly
   - Ensure students that there is support available to them at every step along their pathway to graduation

   **When used effectively and holistically, these elements will improve retention and graduation rates and allow for student success.**
Data and analytics are being used across many industries in powerful ways. Data collected from various industries is being used to predict what customers want, as well as to suggest other products that their customers would likely buy. Data is also used to identify a customer’s pain and then solve that pain—and these are just a couple of examples of big data use. Thus, it is no surprise that higher education now uses data to provide insight that allows for improved educational practice. Nearly all institutions have the data to identify student risk levels. The key is to unlock the right data and to examine the critical elements related to student retention and graduation —such as study habits, enrollment and re-enrollment patterns, transfer patterns, academic progress, grades and other elements of various risk levels.

Unfortunately, many institutions are not yet equipped with the right tools to collect the right data. Or, if data are collected, they are not always being analyzed or interpreted in the most effective ways to benefit students or allow for truly effective decision-making with regard to student success programming.
To determine what data, if any, institutions are using and how they are using it, Blackboard asked the survey respondents three questions:

1. Do you think the use of data analysis would help improve student retention?

2. Do you think data collection is efficient and accurate?

3. For what reasons does your institution currently not use data analysis?

The results showed that, while nearly all of those who responded believe data is an important factor, few are taking the necessary steps to do something about it.

As you can see in the graph on page 11 (Figure 1.2), budgetary concerns and the necessary infrastructure top the list of reasons why public and private four-year institutions reported not using data. However, in the case of community colleges, 50% of respondents reported having data, but not being sure how to use it.
In Blackboard's previously published *Trends in Boosting Student Retention report,* only a quarter of the surveyed group of administrators (specializing in enrollment, academic affairs, student services and retention) considered retention data to be “readily accessible.” [See Figure 1.3]
Figure 1.3: How Easy is it For You to Access the Data/Analytics That Might Help You Improve Student Retention

76% report that data and analytics relevant to student retention are not readily accessible

Figure 1.4: What Factors Are Decreasing the Usability of Your Institutions Data?

- Dispersed or hard to access data is the top impediment to its usability, followed by lack of resources to perform analysis.
- The data exists in many new places & silos (52%)
- Resources to do analysis (48%)
- Can’t easily access the data/get reports (36%)

However, the most common reason given for not using the data suggests that the proper collection and analysis processes simply aren’t in place. [See Figure 1.4]

The effect of not using data, or not using it well, can create a trial and error cycle on a campus that leads to little or no improvement in retention and graduation rates. This was a more acceptable approach when institutions only had qualitative opinions, anecdotal
evidence and limited access to data to determine what students needed and who would most likely need support. Today, there is accessibility to a surplus of data that allows institutions to be much more targeted with decisions. Knowing which students need support and what kind of support is invaluable. Having the right data and effectively analyzing that data enables schools to determine which programs are actually having a positive effect, allowing dollars to be spent on the best retention practices to increase student success.

The more insight higher education institutions have into who their students are and what they need, the more likely they are to implement effective student success programming. Effective data collection and interpretation is key to developing programs and services that will help students achieve their goals – it helps institutions retain their students.

**Use Data to Understand Who Your Students Are From the Start**

**The Decision to Apply**
What if administrators knew exactly how and why students were choosing their institution?

According to the 398 students surveyed, the most influential factor in the application process is finding a school that has the right programs to achieve their chosen career path. [See Figure 1.5]
This reason also topped the list when we segmented our data into four-year public and four-year private institutions. There was a slight variation in the results for two-year community colleges though – those students listed their friends and family telling them about the school as the most influential aspect of the decision making process, with having the right programs coming in a close second. [See Figure 1.6]
So, why is it important to know what influences a student’s decision to apply?

The process for how students select the school they will attend is usually considered from a marketing or admissions standpoint. However, taking into account a student’s selection from a retention perspective may be a more beneficial approach since our survey showed that a large proportion of students know they will transfer before they even start.

Understanding details about incoming student populations allows for a focus on student retention and graduation from the beginning. What could an institution do with detailed information about their incoming class? Information, such as a large majority of incoming students came from high schools with a strong STEM program. Or a weak STEM program? What if the institution knew that an abnormal number of students would commute to campus? What if an institution knew
that a student only wanted to attend the institution to improve their grades and move on to another school? These kinds of answers would allow for specific programming to create a positive student experience and enable early intervention to prevent drop outs and stop outs and perhaps even planned transfers.

The goal is always to provide a positive experience at an institution and get the students through to graduation, but there also must be an intentional focus on the students who will gain the most from these efforts. With “intended to transfer from the start” as one of the most common reasons students transfer [See Figure 1.7], an institution would benefit from targeted programs to retain these students who never intended to stay in the first place, but nevertheless are good students who do well and are low risk.

![Figure 1.7: Student-Given Reasons for Transferring From Previous School](image-url)

Please select the top 3 reasons why you transferred from your previous school.
The Decision to Transfer

What if institutions could know exactly why students leave their institution?

They may know when their students transfer, but do they always know why? In order to adequately address the problem of student retention, institutions need to have a clear understanding of the root causes of student transfer. The research indicated that the real reasons students are transferring might not be the same as the reasons why administrators think they are transferring.

Interestingly, the table below [Table 1.1] shows that the reasons the students in this particular survey cited for transferring remained consistent across the board, with “intended to transfer from the start” and “degree program not available” showing up among the top reasons for all three types of institutions. However, there was some slight variability. Students from four-year private institutions named “campus culture did not fit” as their top reason for transferring and, while “class availability” ranked third overall, it wasn’t listed as one of the top three for the results by four-year public or private students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1: Student-Given Reasons for Why Students Leave an Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most common reasons</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended to transfer from start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree program not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Least common reasons</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of free wi-fi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough student diversity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast to student responses, administrators were asked to rank the reasons why students leave an institution from most common to least common. [See Figure 1.8] “Financial reasons” ranked the highest—a response given by only 27% of students when asked to select their top three motivators for transferring. [See Figure 1.7 on page16]

Figure 1.8: Adminstration-Given Reasons for Why Students Leave an Institution

Financial reasons
Personal reasons
Academic performance
Academic preparedness
Intended transfer from start
Class availability
Lack of institutional resources
Lack of available technology
Uncaring professors and staff

Which of the following are the top reasons students leave your institution? Please rank from most common to least common.

This gap in understanding and insight only serves to highlight the importance of collecting and interpreting the right data in order to gain a better understanding of what students want and need from their student experience. If institutions don't know what's driving student choices, it is difficult to determine the best way to reduce transfer rates and retain more students.

Institutions will have to make the decision on what types of student success programming is right for their unique student body— a challenge covered more in the next chapter— but the right insight into who students are can affect the design and development of student success programming.
Data-driven Retention Programming
Survey respondents were asked to share which student retention programs or strategies are currently offered at their institutions, which ones are considered most effective and whether or not data is used to show the effectiveness of the success programming. [See Table 1.2]

Survey results showed several inconsistencies about what student success programming was most effective on campuses that forced the questions: Are institutions using their data to inform their decisions? Or are the strategies on campus based on opinion and tradition – effectively taking a trial and error approach to success programming? The answers were mixed. While some institutions answered that data was used to inform the effectiveness of the success programming, others did not.

For instance, when asked to identify the most effective retention strategies, administrators across all three institution types listed campus-funded tutoring and supplemental instruction as most effective. There also appeared to be a general consensus about the least effective programs —with work-study opportunities and career advising appearing frequently.

Table 1.2: Most and Least Effective Programs by Institution Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most effective programs</th>
<th>4 Year Public Institution</th>
<th>4 Year Private Institution</th>
<th>2 Year Community College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental instruction</td>
<td>Programs specifically designed for first-year students</td>
<td>Peer tutoring</td>
<td>Campus funded tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus funded tutoring</td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs specifically designed for first-year students</td>
<td>Peer tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least effective programs</td>
<td>Orientation programs</td>
<td>Work-study opportunities</td>
<td>Career advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-study opportunities</td>
<td>Learning communities</td>
<td>Career advising</td>
<td>Work-study opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Graduation advising</td>
<td>Honors programs for academically advanced students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, work-study and career advising were two of the three most commonly listed retention programs currently offered overall. In fact, for all three types of institutions, at least one of their most common retention tactics currently offered offered was also on the least effective list.

| Table 1.3: Most and Least Commonly Offered Programs by Institution Type |
|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| **Most common programs** | **4 Year Public Institution** | **4 Year Private Institution** | **2 Year Community College** |
| Career advising | Orientation programs | Development education |
| Extracurricular activities | Career advising | Work-study opportunities |
| Orientation programs | Work-study opportunities | |

| **Least common programs** | **4 Year Public Institution** | **4 Year Private Institution** | **2 Year Community College** |
| Development education | Development education | Summer bridge programs |
| Graduation advising | Manditory first year professional advising | Peer mentoring |
| Mandatory first year professional advising | Summer bridge programs | Learning communities |

Moreover, less than 40% of the same programs that were rated effective had used data to determine the effectiveness of those programs. Ultimately, traditional programming is in place at the surveyed institutions, despite what the data tells the institution about the effectiveness of those programs. Institutions need to not only collect data, but also interpret that data to inform where resources need to be allocated.

One exception is highlighted in green above [See Table 1.3 above and Table 1.2 page19]: community colleges identified orientation programs as one of their most effective and most common retention strategies. This exception may be due to a better use of data to understand student needs.
Community colleges represented in this survey aren’t just collecting data from all programs; they appear to be using data to inform the decision to put an orientation program in place on their campus. The table below [Table 1.4] illustrates which programs schools identified using data to measure success. Based on the survey, community colleges are the only type of institution regularly measuring success through data in programming that they also identify as being effective – orientation programs and campus-funded tutoring. Four-year public and four-year private institutions identified several areas where they were using data to measure success, but there was no overlap in these areas where data was used and programs that were considered effective [See Table 1.2 page 19]. In fact, four-year public institutions identified “orientation programs” as one of the main areas where data is used to measure success; however, “orientation programs” was also commonly listed as one of the least effective retention programs.

Table 1.4: Programs that Use Data to Measure Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programs that use data the most</th>
<th>4 Year Public Institution</th>
<th>4 Year Private Institution</th>
<th>2 Year Community College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programs specifically designed for 1st year students</td>
<td>Orientation programs</td>
<td>Orientation programs</td>
<td>Development education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer bridge programs</td>
<td>Programs specifically designed for 1st year students</td>
<td>Peer mentoring</td>
<td>Orientation programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Campus funded tutoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programs that use data the least</th>
<th>4 Year Public Institution</th>
<th>4 Year Private Institution</th>
<th>2 Year Community College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development education</td>
<td>Supplemental instruction</td>
<td>Peer mentoring</td>
<td>Learning communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation advising</td>
<td>Peer mentoring</td>
<td>Graduation advising</td>
<td>Graduation advising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Putting It into Practice: How Lewis and Clark Community College Created Full At-Risk Profiles

The student success team at Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) used Blackboard Analytics to find which factors made students more vulnerable to attrition. Their research revealed just how inaccurate assumptions can be in the absence of data. For instance, without data to confirm it, conventional thinking might lead the LCCC administration to identify developmental students as high-risk. Luckily, their research revealed there was more to the story – developmental status alone did not correlate with a higher rate of attrition. Instead, they were able to identify a series of attributes that put students at risk – such as GPA, number of credit hours, gender, ethnicity, and enrollment type – and discovered that students who met four or five of those criteria were at an even greater risk. This led LCCC to develop full at-risk profiles that identified a hierarchy of students at-risk. Thanks to this level of understanding provided by the data, they were able to concentrate their retention strategy where it was needed most. Over the course of three semesters, LCCC has saved $700,000 and improved their retention rate by 17 points, making them an example of a true success story.

By taking the time to collect data and analyze it for trends, institutions can invest in better programming that gives students the best chance of success. Simply put, data helps an institution understand its students better. Institutions can gain insight into student habits and behaviors, plus increase their understanding of what types of success programming will be the most effective. After all, if an institution doesn’t know its students or what is working well, how can it expect to know what students need?

However, as important as data is for determining what programming is best for students on one particular campus, it’s equally important to have the right strategy in place for making use of that data. Whose responsibility is it to collect, interpret, share and make use of findings?
Frequently, institutions say they are focused on student success, but the reality is that there is still a strong focus on enrollment. Of course, enrollment is important, but retention and graduation rates are equally as important, if only from a practical point of view. Student recruitment efforts require substantial institutional expenditures, such as the hiring of staff, travel funding and marketing costs. In contrast, retention initiatives designed to manage student enrollment are estimated to be three to five times more cost-effective than recruitment efforts. Or, in other words, it takes three to five times as much money to recruit a new student than it does to retain an already enrolled student.6 As Joe Cuseo cites in his article, “Fiscal Benefits of Student Retention and First-Year Retention Initiatives,” (pointing to research published by J.P. Bean and D. Hossler in 1990): “a student who is retained at an institution for four years will generate the same income as four new students who leave after one year.”7

6 Noel, Levitz and Saluri, 1985; Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1983; Tinto, 1975
Despite the motivation of performance-based funding and the fact that it is more cost effective to keep current students than recruit new ones, achieving the shift in mindset in higher education tends to be a challenge.

Who Spends the Most?
Private colleges spent the most to bring in new undergraduates in 2012-2013, spending $2,433 per new student at the median, in comparison with $457 per new student and $123 per new student on average at four-year and two-year public institutions, respectively.8

That's why it is crucial that the plan for student success starts at the top. As Linda Baer and John Campbell write in Game Changers, “Leaders need to create an institutional culture to use analytic tools to maximize the potential for improved student access, student learning, progression and success.”9 But it's not enough for leaders to say they're committed to student success—it needs to become a campus-wide effort.

Who is leading the charge for student success on these campuses? Blackboard asked our survey respondents if they had at least one full-time employee devoted exclusively to student retention and found fairly mixed results. [See Figure 2.1]

Four-year public institutions were most likely to staff a full-time retention employee, with 48% of survey participants replying yes. For four-year private colleges, this number dropped slightly to 43% and, even more significantly, it dropped to 34% for community colleges.
Figure 2.1: Full-Time Employee Exclusively Devoted to Oversee Student Retention

However, even with these split results, more and more schools are dedicating a role to student retention compared to previous years. This suggests that more proactive and data-driven student success programming is becoming an institutional practice.

While having a point person is important, a true increase in student success needs to involve the entire campus. It isn't enough to name a leader or department and consider the problem solved. Everyone from the president all the way down to the students needs to be involved in the necessary culture change. Rather than simply proclaiming, “We will improve retention and graduation rates by X%,” institutional leaders need to work towards implementing a campus-wide strategy. To achieve this, the following steps need to be taken by campus leadership:

1. Define what success looks like to their individual campus

2. Develop clear and concise action plans that are informed by data
3. Institute programs, policies and governance that address student success

4. Engage in constant monitoring to determine if programs are effective

This may seem difficult to achieve, but schools that have adapted these practices are already seeing great results.

**Getting the Faculty Involved: How Paul Smith’s College Changed the Language to Change the Mindset**

When Dr. Loralyne Taylor was asked to become the registrar at Paul Smith’s College, she wasn’t quite sure what she was getting herself into. Part of her new responsibilities was to serve on a college-wide retention committee with the goal of improving their low retention rate of 60%. Despite employing numerous committees and even hiring a director of retention, the numbers wouldn’t budge.

Eventually, Dr. Taylor and her colleagues realized that a three-person office just wasn’t going to do the trick. They needed a technology solution that could unite a campus-wide effort. And they needed a campus culture that supported student success.

As a former professor, Dr. Taylor understands why faculty members were so resistant to retention efforts. “When you talk retention to a faculty member, what they hear is ‘you want me to lower my standards in class to keep someone here that does not belong here.’ And that is very difficult to overcome,” she says. So, rather than focusing on keeping students from failing, Paul Smith’s shifted the focus to getting students to succeed.

“Language is important. We no longer talk about ‘high failure rate classes,’ because that gets the faculty defensive,” Dr. Taylor explains. “When we shift that conversation to ‘how can we help your students learn more and be more successful in your course so that they are more successful in their next course...you are going to automatically get faculty on board with that. That’s what they want. They want their students to perform better.”
Through making changes in their approach and motivating a campus-wide effort, Paul Smith’s College has seen their retention rate increase from 60% to as high as 72.5%. Even though it’s a constant battle, Dr. Taylor believes their approach speaks for itself. By shifting their focus, they’re building a culture of support that engages an entire campus in the goal of student success.

**Making Data Accessible: How Boise State University Made Student Success a Collaborative Effort**

When Boise State decided to give student success a data-driven focus, they assembled a team of stakeholders from multiple departments – academic affairs, advising, business intelligence, and IT, to name a few—to create informed profiles of at-risk students. Once they identified the variables of risk dimension, [See Figure 2.2] they created a mobile accessible, student success dashboard that enabled cross-departmental stakeholders to track students over the course of the semester.

As Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies Dr. Sharon McGuire explains, accessible data is helping to create a new culture on campus: “By making the data easy for advising offices, faculty, and department chairs, we have empowered our faculty and staff, and provided to them a better ownership of student success. Collectively, we also have developed a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of our unique student population.”

The idea of welcoming an entire campus to take ownership of student success has allowed Boise State to tackle the problems of at-risk students in real-time. Now, rather than having to wait on a report from the registrar and enrollment management, an advisor can access data about an individual student’s risk factors instantly – and they have the campus-wide context to interpret it.

According to Troy Haan, the Director of Business Intelligence and Reporting Services at Boise State, one key element of the initiative’s success clearly stands out: “Collaboration between departments was critical.”

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**Figure 2.2. Risk Dimensions at Boise State University**

- Unmet financial requirements
- Enrollment status as part-time
- Late application to the University
- Low high school GPA and test scores
- Remedial math or English needed
- Enrolled in < 12 credits in first semester (part time)
- Withdrew from any courses during their first semester
These examples illustrate what’s possible when schools develop a clear strategy and involve the key stakeholders in the implementation. Beyond just the faculty and administration, engaging students in their own success is also critical. And no student success strategy is complete without the incorporation of the necessary technology and resources to better engage students throughout the student lifecycle.
Student Engagement

Student success requires a coordinated and integrated approach to engagement—engagement among educators and administrators, as well as students.

According to the National Survey for Student Engagement, the top performing institutions in the country are making an effort to embrace campus-wide student engagement.\[^{10}\] This engagement appears to be especially important when it comes to involving faculty in student success. The latest survey results revealed that a third of students rarely met with an advisor during their first year. Among those who didn't were high numbers of commuters, non-traditional or part-time students.

When students feel like they are a part of a community and experience active engagement on campus, they’re less likely to look for other options.

\[^{10}\] http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2014_Results/pdf/NSSE_2014_Annual_Results.pdf
environment. However, in spite of numerous methods of communication for institutions to choose from, why are so many schools falling short when it comes to effective communication? What is the most effective way to communicate with students in order to have the greatest impact on student success? How do institutions create a personal and positive student experience for all students when resources are so limited?

**Means of Communication**

The right amount of communication is important, but determining that right amount can be tricky. The best approach to making this determination is to track communication with data. For instance, students must provide their consent in order to be contacted via text message or push notification; therefore, by tracking the permissions granted and student responses to these notifications, an institution can determine what type of communication students are most responsive to and what they tend to avoid. Having this type of data allows for an institution to create an informed communication plan that provides students with information they need in a way that students prefer while increasing the students’ positive experience. Knowing these numbers can give a sense of the student population’s communication preferences. Effective student success programming and strategies will include a communication plan that works at each individual campus or institution.

When administrators were asked to identify the methods of communication that best described how their school communicates with students and to select all options that applied, the expectation was that email would rank high [See Figure 3.1]. And it did – overall, 95% of respondents identified email as a top method of communication. However, while this number is high – and even higher for community colleges and private institutions at 97%—it wasn’t all-inclusive.
Phones still seem to serve a consistent role in communication with students and text messaging wasn’t as substantially reported as expected. In fact, “other” even ranked well ahead of text messaging at four-year private institutions.

Since data allows institutions to know their students and their risk levels, determining the most effective communication plan for their unique population and campus is the next step in addressing those risks. Luckily, technology offers numerous accessible options for communications. For instance, through research conducted earlier this year and compiled in Blackboard’s Trends in Online Research report, Blackboard learned that schools are using a variety of technological tools to connect with students and foster a sense of community on campus. The top response (at 52%) was electronic newsletters, with targeted Facebook pages coming in next at 46%. Other popular options were webcasts, live online Q&A sessions, and mixed media forums, such as Google Hangouts.
Frequency of Communication

Over 30% of schools at all three types of institutions reported communicating with students daily about upcoming social events [See Figure 3.2], while a significantly smaller portion—just 6% overall—communicate daily with at-risk students to provide support and guidance [See Figure 3.3].

For both two-year community colleges and four-year private institutions, once a week was the most popular answer, coming in at 24% and 23%, respectively. However, at four-year public institutions, that number was even lower—only 14%—with the most common response being “less frequently than once a month.”

Figure 3.2: Frequency of Communication About Social Events
Social engagement is important to providing students with a positive experience. Communicating with students about upcoming social events is most likely higher than other communication at the surveyed institutions due to the ease of sending a generalized mass notification about something that could pertain to all students. Few institutions have the capability to reach students on an individual basis. While communication plans are unique to individual institutions, constant contact and ongoing support of students has been found to be critical to student success.
Institutions must find a way to communicate with students on a personal level and, in order to do that, institutions must have data to identify students that need the personal attention and the technology to reach those students.

The Role of Technology in Engagement
Since today’s incoming students are used to being constantly connected to the world by merely touching a screen, technology plays an important role in communicating and keeping students engaged.

For many non-traditional students, technology can provide the possibility of remaining enrolled when traditionally attending class is not a viable option. Thanks to the research conducted for Blackboard’s Trends in Online Research report, it was determined that strong online programs are a significant factor in attracting and retaining students. When asked to rate the importance of taking courses online on a scale of one to five, 64% of respondents answered with a four or a five, indicating that having strong online programs are critical to attracting and retaining students.

In fact, more students than ever are experiencing digital learning environments. According to a recently published study by EDUCAUSE, 85% of students surveyed reported taking a course that contained at least some online components. The study also found that a majority of students (72%) prefer courses that blend online and face-to-face work.

Since online learning options appear to be so central to a positive student experience, investing in online classes as part of your student success strategy can help improve student satisfaction and retention. However, technology isn’t just a crucial part of student education, it can also play a pivotal role in reaching out to students to keep them engaged in their own success.

Take “nudges,” for example. In addition to the constant email and Facebook notifications students receive on their smart phones, technology nudges that remind them to register for classes, alert them to potential GPA

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issues or simply offer encouragement can make a big difference. Some schools are employing nudges through an automated texting system, or apps, while others outsource student support services through call centers.

How Pierpont Community and Technical College Took Action to Increase Re-enrollment by 23%

Like many community colleges, Pierpont Community and Technical College struggled with stop outs – students who declined re-enrollment in the next term. Though they had plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest why this was the case, Pierpont’s Director of Enrollment Research and Planning, Ron Weist, wanted more clear-cut data. In addition to discovering why so many students weren’t re-enrolling, Weist also set a goal to re-enroll as many inactive students as possible.

Pierpont enlisted Blackboard’s help by using call center resources to contact 2,900 students for a phone survey. Through this outreach, the need for one major change was highlighted: more accessible support. Pierpont staffed a call center, but only held hours from 9:00 – 5:00. The hours did not suit the needs of their non-traditional student body, many of whom worked full-time during the day. The survey reports revealed that the call center was four times more likely to reach a student outside of the standard hours. By collecting this data, Pierpont was able to discover specific and actionable changes they could make based on the needs of their student body to reduce stop out rates in the future.

Pierpont grew their re-enrollment rate by 23% by simply asking inactive students how they could help them achieve their goals. Weist said this bonus made the campaign well worth the investment. “Our Administration said this campaign was the best money we spent all year. We only need[ed] to re-admit five students to get an ROI and we did more than five times that,” he says. “In my opinion, the work was worth it for data on non-matriculating students even without the re-admitted students. Getting students back as a PLUS.”
Engagement is critical to a positive student experience. Students are often easily discouraged, particularly in the beginning of their college careers when they face new challenges and difficult coursework that cause them to doubt their abilities. However, student engagement shouldn’t be the work of just one department. It is up to everyone on campus to provide a support system that creates a step-by-step pathway for students to succeed through the lifecycle from admission to graduation.

Nudges at Every Step Along the Student Lifecycle

- Graduation
- Work Experiences
- Re-registration Failure
- AA Session
- Final Grades
- FA Reminders
- Re-registration
- Mid term Grades
- Social Tracking
- Ongoing Grades
- Absences
- Student Accounts
- FA checklist/ Housing
- Student Checklist
- Welcome & 1st AA Session
- Admission/Enrollment
Research and experience suggest that the best approach to increased retention and graduation rates is a holistic one. Simply relying on data, strategy or engagement alone won’t suffice. Instead, institutions need to use a combination of all three tactics to create effective student success programming. Higher education is actively seeking and trying different methods to address the issues of low retention and graduation rates. The field of research and methodology grows daily.

Based on Blackboard’s research, the findings can be summed up in the following three conclusions:

- By understanding students through the collection, interpretation and effective use of data and leveraging the findings, institutions can create and manage student success programs that address their specific retention issues.
• Staffing a student success team is a step in the right direction, but improvements to student retention won’t happen without leadership, sponsorship and an integrated approach.

• When students are engaged in the process of their own success, they’re more likely to make it to graduation. This means targeted programming support and services and personalized, systematic communication. Leaving students to “figure it out” on their own will only cause retention rates to drop even further.

Whether the institution in question is a two-year community college, a four-year private or a four-year public institution, the bottom line remains the same. The goal of getting more students through the lifecycle to completion is universal.
About the Author

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Terianne is a student retention specialist with more than 15 years of experience in education and higher education management. Her vast knowledge on the subject comes from her experience in academic advising, faculty evaluation, career services and online teaching.

Throughout her career, Terianne has worked extensively with both traditional and non-traditional students and has been instrumental in implementing a broad set of student success programs at various schools and institutions. As part of the Blackboard team, Terianne serves as a subject matter expert for student retention and works to provide student retention content that motivates continuous improvements for all Blackboard solutions. Prior to joining Blackboard, Terianne served as Director of Faculty Evaluation at Strayer University. There, she led a faculty evaluation program to ensure teaching met university standards, as well as oversaw the implementation of an academic advising program that resulted in improved retention of the online student community. Prior to her work at Strayer, Terianne taught elementary school in Miami and Washington, D.C.

Terianne received her Bachelor’s degree in education and Spanish from the University of Miami. She also graduated with honors from the University of Miami School of Law. She is a member of the Florida Bar and is fluent in Spanish.