IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION:
Five Ways to Enhance Learning in and out of the Classroom
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Improving Retention

According to the Community College Student Survey on Engagement published in 2010, “Only 28% of first-time, full-time, associate degree-seeking community college students graduate with a certificate or an associate degree within three years,” and only “45% of students who enter community college with the goal of earning a degree or certificate have met their goal six years later.” These statistics are nothing short of astounding, giving great pause to educators and decision makers across the country. Fortunately, a good start to solving a problem is being optimistic and aware.

One of the best ways to improve retention is to increase engagement, a process which is good for institutions and students alike. Naturally, one of the bigger motivators behind the drive for improvement is monetary. Students who stay enrolled exclusively at an institution provide greater income for their college as they work toward degrees. A second, equally important, reason is for positive word of mouth, as exemplary graduates go on to stand as shining examples of success, with ties back to their school. Perhaps the most important reason is the third: the process of finding ways to increase retention helps to instill the mindset of a lifelong learner in students, equipping them with the academic and personal skills they need to overcome challenges in the workforce.

Interested in learning more? Read on for more information, our best tips, and interesting findings. Put the research to work and start taking steps to improve retention in your school today!

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1. Offer Flexible Courses

In efforts to improve retention, it is important to consider flexibility.

Because many variables impact the availability of a students’ time, institutions must recognize that coursework does not always top the list of priorities. This is particularly true when it’s put up against personal needs and responsibilities like balancing work schedules, juggling childcare, and commuting to campus.

In an effort to meet the needs that this reality presents, colleges would do well to adopt a flexible style of instruction; making course material available at any time, and in any location. A favorable way to accomplish this is by publishing course content in video form; granting students the ability to consume media at a time and speed that suits them. In a recent article by Kelsey Sheehy of U.S. News & World Report, the VP of Institutional Effectiveness at Odessa College, Don Wood, revealed that their “students work a lot at midnight […] they’re engaged at odd hours.” By removing barriers and making content easier to reach and review, students are provided with everything they need to be more engaged and invested in completing their degree. This also frees
up valuable face-to-face time in class, allowing professors and students to interact on a deeper and more focused level; exploring trouble spots and increasing the quality and amount of learning.

Relating to this are findings from two studies on dropout rates and the availability of video as a supplement to course content. A 2012 study performed by Nitza Geri of The Open University of Israel explored the relationship between these factors, with fascinating results. While her findings are specifically attributed to distance learning, she observed that 25% of overseas students who failed a specific finance course dropped out of school. However, after introducing video course content in subsequent trials, all of the overseas students who failed the course stayed in the program - even though they had not successfully completed the challenging course. Adding weight to this is another study by H. David Brecht, aptly titled: “Learning from Online Video Lectures.” His research on the same topic at California State University similarly revealed that “all with-video samples had significantly lower dropout rates than the no-video sample,” which “was 11.1%.” Compare this to his range of 0% to 4.4% dropouts across his three samples of courses providing additional learning by way of video content, and considerable importance can be placed on such an offering. Altogether, this research suggests that supplemental videos give students a needed push to persevere.

2. Consider Brevity

Whether meeting in person or recording content, carefully consider the brevity of a given day’s material. It is important that instructors be considerate of their respective audiences and take special care to ensure that redundancy is kept to a minimum - doled out only intentionally as an accentuation or clarification of a key point.

It’s imperative to keep this in mind while lecturing, either inperson or while filming, largely for the fact that it’s difficult to maintain the attention of a group. Fortunately, this is nothing to be ashamed of; in fact, a 1967 study by Johnstone, titled “Attention Breaks in Literature,” reported that “no matter how good the teacher or how compelling the subject matter,” students have a window of optimal focus that lasts from 10 to 18 minutes, and only after a settling period of three to five minutes. But while this may seem an unavoidable problem, there are ways to use this knowledge to your advantage.

Recall the aforementioned thoughts on using face-to-face time as a supplement to content viewed at home. This allows for class time to be broken up in a more conversational manner, ebbing and flowing to maintain interest and foster a deeper level of thinking. But before filming begins, consider the following: Philip Guo, assistant professor of computer science at the University of Rochester, published a study on edX titled “Optimal Video Length for Student Engagement.” According to his report, “the optimal video length is six minutes or shorter,” and the average amount of minutes watched decreases significantly beyond that threshold. Perhaps this sounds intimidating, but it should be considered a comfort! Since this indicates that longer content is less likely to be watched, there’s no need to prepare lengthy content in advance. You only need to effectively summarize and communicate the necessary points, then dig in deeper in-person as questions arise.

Also comforting is another finding by Guo and two of his colleagues, Juho Kim and Rob Rubin. Their study, titled “How Video Production Affects Student Engagement: An Empirical Study of MOOC Videos,” revealed that “videos where instructors speak fairly fast and with high enthusiasm are more engaging.” This means that instructors are welcome to speak in the same manner that they would if they were having a lively, passionate discussion or debate in class with their students. There is no need for forced pauses and slow speaking, as viewers have the opportunity - and responsibility - to pause and rewind as needed.
3. Humanize

According to Laurie A. Schreiner, professor and director of doctoral programs in higher education at Azusa Pacific University, “the more faculty are available outside of class to augment the advisor’s role, the greater the chance of student success and persistence.” She also reported that “student satisfaction is indeed connected to student persistence, as well as to the word-of-mouth reputation of an institution.” Her findings were largely centered around campus climate - the general feelings of belongingness, pride, and understanding associated with school life - and she discovered that higher ratings of a good climate could increase “a student’s odds of persisting by as much as 80 percent.” Combine with this findings from The University of California in a study titled “Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education,” by Professor Alexander Astin, that “frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement.”

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Countless opportunities for such interactions are available virtually as well. Consider the points above about flexibility, and apply them to the need for student-to-faculty interaction. Materials offered for consumption outside the classroom grant institutions additional time to interact with students, and, fortunately, are not difficult to create.

For instance, a simple form can serve as a point of interaction. Feedback can be sought by asking pointed questions about content and courses, and conversation can begin by asking questions prior to a lesson’s introduction. Online, students can be quizzed not only on course material, but on areas for course improvement as well. Giving them a voice in the class’s direction provides a sense of involvement, particularly when feedback is fully accepted and incorporated. Thoughtful questions and responses must be provided in order to show students that their opinions and needs are respected.

Another method for easily adding more face time to your weekly schedule is by sharing video content in the form of first-time lectures, feedback, daily debriefs, or any other format that may suit the needs of a course. In doing so, keep in mind the findings from Guo’s “Empirical Study of MOOC Videos,” in which he discovered that “videos produced with a more personal feel could be more engaging than high-fidelity studio recordings.” This means that there is no pressing need to invest in major production equipment - a camera phone or webcam will do just fine. Guo also found that videos containing an instructor’s talking head - ideally seated at their desk and not behind a podium - were more engaging than those without. You’ll see in Figure 1 that the videos begin with an equal engagement rate, only to have the talking heads jump to an approximately 25% higher engagement than those without, at the six to nine minute mark. Knowing this, institutions are given considerable freedoms and leeway in terms of content creation. With the prevalence of camera-equipped mobile devices, creating an engaging learning experience for your students is as easy as getting started with the resources that are likely already available to staff - their phones and their classrooms.
4. Be Available

The concept of availability is very closely tied to that of humanizing the learning environment. Creating an overall theme of accountability for students can be difficult in the face of time constraints and responsibilities. With growing class sizes and increasingly limited time, it’s difficult to seem approachable and available, and identifying those that are falling behind - let alone matching a face to a name - is often a job done in vain. Thankfully, being aware of this challenge is the first step toward finding a solution.

In a 2009 study carried out by the ACT, the three factors that had the largest impact on retention in four-year public and private universities centered entirely around interactions with advisors. In varying order, the presence of an academic advising center, advising interventions, and increasing the number of advisors were all cited as being largely responsible for improved retention. Without a doubt, providing human connections, especially advisory ones, at the college level is an indisputable part of student success.

Interventions, in particular, can be a powerful means of increasing retention. “Establishing an Early Warning System: Predicting Low Grades in College Students from Survey of Academic Orientations Scores,” a study by Beck and Davidson, found that offering early warnings for students at risk of dropping out can be very effective for improving retention. Additionally, Wesley Habley of ACT cites academic intervention as one of the top collegiate practices with the highest impact on retention, falling only behind tutoring and freshman seminars. Couple all of this with the fact that student-faculty relationships are important to creating a fulfilling college experience, and the need for office hours and academic intervention, either online or digital, voluntary or otherwise, is undeniable.

As an example, Odessa College offers students plenty of opportunities to meet with staff and faculty, including personal phone calls in response to troubling grades. Shawn Shreves, vice president for information technology at Odessa, told U.S. World News and Report: “If a student has a bad day on a test, we have someone calling them the next day.” Not surprisingly, the practice of being hyperaware of the state of any student’s academic performance can significantly contribute to improving outcomes.

5. Provide a Foundation

The National Survey of Student Engagement reported in their 2014 Annual Report that “student success is built on student-centered culture,” so it is important to orient your programs and courses around what matters most. Find ways to engage and delight your students, and they’ll be more likely to stick around. But what’s the best way to make the biggest impact?

Start by properly introducing students to college life by way of an orientation. Teaching effective study habits, time management, note-taking, and test-taking skills can make all the difference in increasing retention. In fact, the 2005 edition of the NSSE, a sister study of the one cited above, reported that students who attended Freshman Seminar programs were more likely to report increased “collaborative learning activities,” they “interact[ed] more frequently with faculty,” “perceive[d] the campus and environment as being more supportive,” and were “more satisfied with the college...
experience” as a whole. Additionally, Schnell’s 2003 study on the first year seminar’s long-term impact, as reported in the ACT’s 2003 report, “The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention,” examined the requirement of a first-year seminar and its effect on graduation rates. Through their study, researchers found that students who attended a seminar in their first year were more likely to complete their education than those who did not.

All of this is complemented by the fact that building academic momentum increases the likelihood of a student remaining in school. “The Summary of Empirically-Tested Perspectives in the Literature on Community and Technical College Student Persistence/Success,” prepared by Loretta Seppanen of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges in 2007, found that many factors lead to this increased momentum, including “earning credits in college-level math in the first two years,” “being continuously enrolled,” and a “rising trend in grades,” all of which are commonly strengthened through proper orientation and academic intervention.

All things considered, creating an all-new or more intensive course may seem like a lot of work, but it must be considered an investment in the future of student long-term success and that of your institution. Set aside fears of finding face-to-face time, too; done well, recorded lectures could simply be deployed for subsequent viewings. Led by an available and socially-invested professor, your institution could proudly begin to instill lifelong skills in its students; providing them with increased competence in the way of “time management, test taking, note taking, and stress management.”

Conclusion

At the heart of all of these findings is an important unifying effect: making the college experience more approachable and more enjoyable - without sacrificing the quality of learning, of course - for your students can contribute significantly to retention rates. By ensuring the humanization of learning and making faculty accessible, students feel more welcome and involved. By allowing them brevity and accessibility of content, you meet them at the crossroads of convenience and respect. Furthermore, by entering into an education partnership by first laying the framework for a meaningful college experience, you outfit your students with the skills they need to be successful in school - and in life. While there are certainly fiscal considerations, the most important thing to keep top of mind when trying to increase retention is improving the lives of graduates. The ultimate goal is to provide a learning environment in which they are guided toward success so that they may be taught to seek and find achievements of their own.
REFERENCES


How Video Production Affects Student Engagement: An Empirical Study of MOOC Videos, Association for Computing Machinery, Mar. 2014, Web, Figure 3.


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