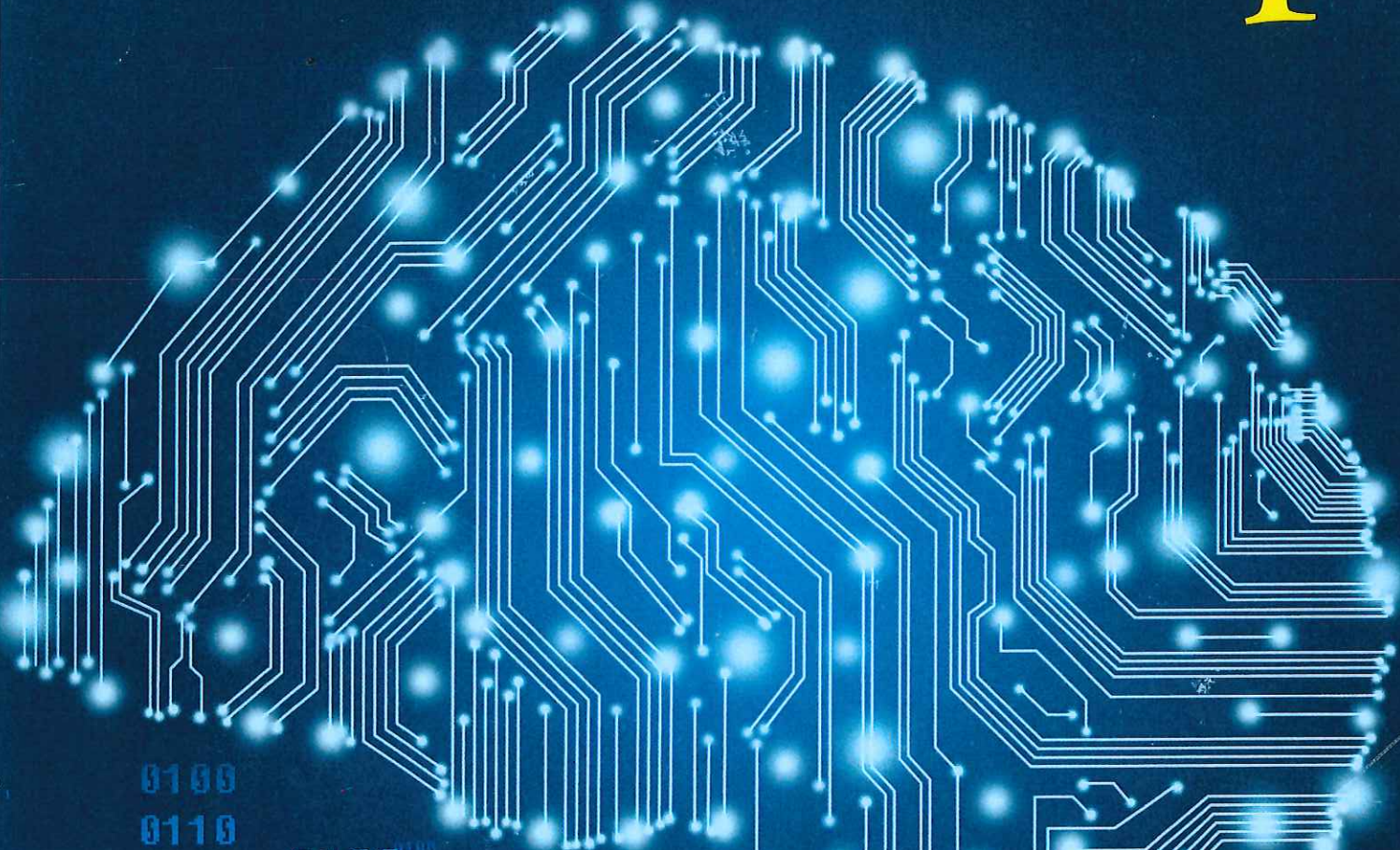


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in

BY JIM HUNDRIESER AND TERRI DAUTCHER

Persistence

What happens when students don't complete a degree? Institutional competitiveness and reputation suffer, and financial stability is threatened. Here's what boards need to know about student success.

WHEN YOU VISIT A campus and meet a student, take a moment to consider the factors that may support or derail that student's academic and professional goals. Each student you encounter represents a data point reflecting institutional performance in two critical areas: student retention and graduation. Some students will complete their degrees as planned, realize professional success, and meet their student debt obligation without issue. Others will fail to persist, never complete their degrees, and struggle to pay off the debt incurred. Where an institution's performance falls on this spectrum has enormous impact on its competitive position in the market, its ability to achieve its financial strategies and goals, and its capacity to achieve its mission.

The underlying factors that influence student persistence and graduation are complex and require strategic consideration and investment. For decades, institutions, state and federal agencies, and numerous foundations have dedicated significant resources to understand why students do not complete their degrees and to identify strategies to increase retention (the measure of the institution's success in building student persistence) and, by extension, graduation rates. Despite the importance of improving completion and retention rates, the graduation rate has grown by a scant 1 percent in recent years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, to 59 percent of all first-time, full-time students who entered a four year institution in the fall of 2009. When considering return on investment, institutions are spending hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of dollars each year to provide support and engagement strategies with the goal of increasing student success. As these data suggest, such efforts have yielded little return.

onstrate to stakeholders the connection between student success and an institution's financial viability.

When tracking retention metrics, it is important to realize that the key to strong enrollment management is providing a valuable, consistent, high-quality student experience, from inquiry to graduation. Since the 1980s, a number of studies have demonstrated that if students receive a high-impact, high-quality experience that prepares them for their future, they are more likely to persist. Vincent Tinto, Ernest Pascarella, P.T. Terenzini, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, and Alexander Astin, to name a few, all came to similar conclusions: Strong levels of student engagement couple with high-impact learning practices and critical supplemental support services are essential to stronger persistence. While some students leave for financial or personal reasons, many depart because their experience does not meet their expectations of value for the price paid. Setting high institutional expectations and establishing performance measures across the landscape of the student experience can support a process of continuous improvement.

TAKEAWAYS

1 The underlying factors that influence student persistence and graduation are complex and require strategic consideration and investment.

2 Key performance indicators such as the first-year retention rate and the cohort six-year graduation rate can increase accountability for student success. Leaders should also consider attrition rates, the number of students who depart from term to term or year to year, and completion rates of transfer students, part-time students, and students enrolled in certificate or graduate programs.

3 To support retention efforts, institutions must have a designated senior level administrator to coordinate related activities, facilitate changes, or eliminate barriers to student success.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Key performance indicators can be used to increase awareness of and accountability for student success. Two bellwether measures are the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate (also called the first-year retention rate) and the cohort six-year graduation rate (the proportion of students who earned a degree after entering the institution at the same time). Leaders should also consider attrition rates, the number of students who depart from term to term or year to year, and completion rates of non-cohort groups such as transfer students, students enrolled part-time, and students enrolled in certificate or graduate programs.

Revenue as a function of retention should also be analyzed, allowing stakeholders to see the impact of persistence on financial performance. Financial data should support investments that will improve persistence and completion. By considering net revenue from tuition paid from enrollment to graduation, and by demonstrating the potential for more robust revenue by increasing retention, institutional leaders can more clearly dem-

STUDENT READINESS

Student readiness for college also is an important consideration when determining, at an institutional level, strategic approaches and resources required to support student success. In *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2016*, published by ACT, only 26 percent of high school graduates tested in 2016 met the organization's College Readiness Benchmarks across all four subjects (English, reading, math, and science). College readiness data can be used to help determine the scope and scale of the academic support infrastructure necessary to prepare students to succeed.

For a moment, put yourself in the seat of an underprepared first-year student. Imagine what it feels like to listen to the opening remarks in your math or composition class, and almost immediately realize that your success is likely to be elusive because the foundational skills required by the professor are not at all familiar to you. You may be worried that if you tell someone you're unprepared, the person will

think your admission was a mistake. You may not have any idea whom to talk with about the feelings of doom you're experiencing.

This first-year student needs remedial academic support, and may benefit from advising and counseling center support to help address the worry or frustration that can quickly overwhelm an underprepared student. In addition to these services, schools increasingly are testing programs to supplement gaps in academic readiness, ranging from summer bridge programs delivered online through learning management systems to first-year academic experiences designed to help students address shortcomings. Institutions are increasingly attempting to identify strategies to help weaker students shore up their academic and non-cognitive skills while keeping stronger students challenged and engaged. As George Kuh and others have recently stated, students thrive at institutions that offer high-impact academic advising, degree planning resources, early warning systems, robust academic support services, and non-punitive remedial education.

ADVISING

Academic advising is an evolving practice. Traditionally, faculty served as advisors to students. While this model persists at many schools—and is successful in many instances—the quality of advising can vary from professor to professor based on a given professor's disposition toward advising and the ability to provide developmentally relevant guidance. Prompted by a desire to deliver a more consistent advising experience and align human resource investment with strategic goals, some schools employ non-faculty academic advisors. These professionals have the expertise and ability to focus solely on students' needs. In addition, because these advising activities are the primary job responsibility, tracking and evaluating them may be more efficient.

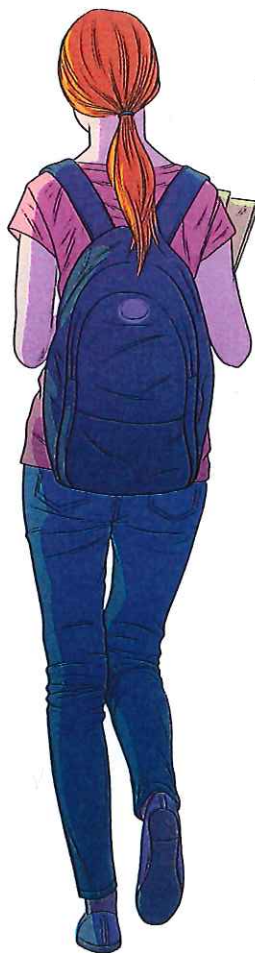
Advising models are based on best practices, such as those established by the National Academic Advising Association, the organization that supports academic advising. Students are taught how to be self-regulating and self-directed as they navigate the degree completion process. Engagement in the education process is

stronger when students understand the path and contours of their unique journey to degree completion.

DEGREE PLANNING

Now put yourself back in the seat of that first-year student, sitting in your first advising session where the professor is talking about "general education," "free electives," "core curriculum," and "course prerequisites." You have no idea what these terms mean or how this information affects you. Robust degree planning models teach students the vocabulary of higher education and minimize the risk of student

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disengagement in response to uncertainty. When schools integrate degree planning in student success initiatives, students are taught how to analyze and follow the sequential steps required to finish their degrees, and avoid unnecessary delay or expense. Technology tools, such as Banner's Degree Works, can aid this process; Degree Works, for example, provides students with the ability to track degree progress, map courses to be taken in future semesters, and process "what if" scenarios if they want to explore the impact of a change in major upon their degree completion.

Degree planning can also help students understand the investment they're making in their education and motivate them to graduate on time and on budget. The correlation between the cost of attending college and the value realized may not be evident to someone who has never had to manage a budget or to whom the expenses are confusing. For example, the most recent National Postsecondary Financial Aid Study found that half of college students surveyed underestimated what they were paying to attend college. A Brookings Institution study found that only 38 percent of college freshmen could accurately estimate how much federal school loan debt they had, and nearly 30 percent of students who had federal debt thought they had no debt at all. With a deeper understanding of the investment being made, a student's motivation to engage and commit to success may be influenced.

CURRICULUM COMPLEXITY

Another hindrance to student success can be curriculum complexity. Whether a continuing student is exploring a change in major or an external transfer student, enrolling from another institution, is trying to decipher the course sequence, cumbersome core curriculum or rigid general education programs can affect retention and graduation rates. Schools that provide mechanisms that allow students to move from one major to another early in their academic career—and offer advising support to help students navigate the process—are more likely to retain students. Without guidance and a seamless pathway to make a change in major in the first few semesters of coursework, a student may even perceive

a decision to transfer to another institution as the path of least resistance.

PREDICTIVE MODELING TOOLS

Predictive modeling tools are helping schools identify and support students who are at risk of having poor academic performance or abandoning their commitment to degree completion. In his article, "Taking Early-Alert and Intervention Programs to the Next Level Using Today's Technologies," Tim Culver of Ruffalo Noel Levitz reports that "many institutions now use tracking software to trigger alerts by monitoring student class performance and attendance. Other institutions ask incoming students to self-reveal their needs using early-alert online surveys even before classes begin. Still other institutions are pinpointing incoming students' risk levels using statistical modeling and analytics."

Proactive interventions, driven by predictive technology tools, shift schools from a passive "wait until the student asks for help" posture. Performance issues that may undermine a student's success can be shored up rather than salvaged after it is potentially too late.

SUPPLEMENTAL AND REMEDIAL INSTRUCTION

The ease of access to, and expense associated with, supplemental instruction and remedial coursework can also influence student persistence. A 2016 research report conducted by Education Reform Now found that one in four first-year college students had to enroll in remedial coursework during his or her first year of college. While remedial courses can present a revenue opportunity for some schools, they erode retention for others as students seek a lower-cost approach to access the remedial support. The need for supplemental instruction and remedial coursework may require leaders to rethink resource allocation for supplemental instruction. Developing strategies to cost-effectively expand tutorial resources and campus writing center access while innovative approaches to provide remedial coursework at a low or no cost to students will be part of forward-thinking initiatives to improve student success.

COUNSELING SERVICES

A significant concern for institutional leaders is the rapidly growing student demand for mental health, substance misuse, or other emotional support services. According to the American College Health Association, 32 percent of students surveyed in a 2015 study reported feeling so depressed "it was difficult to function." The 2016 CIRP Freshman Survey reports that 51 percent of students reported feeling depressed after their arrival on campus, and 47 percent anticipated they would seek personal counseling. Students are seeking counseling support to ensure their success, and colleges need to be prepared to meet the expected demand.

CAREER SERVICES

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) offers extensive research and models to support integration of career and professional topics that are integrated into courses to support student success in college and after graduation. One NACE study of an intensive career program piloted at Ball State University found that the four-year graduation rate for students who participated in the KEY Careers program as freshmen in 2011 was 15.4 percent higher than non-participants.

STUDENT SUCCESS CHAMPION

To support retention efforts, institutions must have a designated, empowered, and visible senior level administrator to coordinate related activities. This person needs to have the ability to work with people at all levels of the organization and feel empowered to facilitate changes to roadblocks or eliminate barriers to student success. In addition, this person has to be a roll-up-your-sleeves kind of worker who is able to meet individually with a student one hour and then facilitate a project plan to ease a pathway for group of students in another. The work of the retention or student success leader should focus on providing broad institutional strategies while engaging with institution subpopulations to build access, opportunities, and pathways for completion that ensure strong degree outcomes. Some institutions make the mistake of appointing this person without setting clear expectations to the campus or cabinet, and/or empowering the person to make change.

There is no point in creating this position if the person does not have the ability to act and make changes.

The factors that influence student success are complex, but they can be influenced, assessed, and continuously enhanced. Most important, student success is a key strategic driver that is the responsibility of everyone involved in the enterprise. In their fiduciary roles, governing boards should be aware of the details, but ultimately must be guided by their responsibility to ensure the welfare and success of the students, the provision of high-quality educational programs that are consistent with institutional mission, and the ever-present need to ensure financial sustainability. ■

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