

Student Success: An Outcome that Matters

By John F. Ebersole

“Outcomes” and “accountability” are terms that those of us in higher education have been hearing a lot about of late. Accreditors, politicians, policy makers and, especially, the U.S. Department of Education have engaged in a growing debate about the degree to which colleges and universities should be held accountable for the outcomes they produce. Of particular interest are graduation rates, time to degree, costs and, most challenging of all, evidence of relevant learning.

While the outcome of this intensifying debate will likely take years to unfold, it is safe to say that accreditors and institutions alike, will be looking more carefully at various metrics and means of assessing both student and institutional performance, from this point forward. Already, a group of independent online institutions and the National Association of State and Land Grant Universities and Colleges (NASLGUC) have initiated separate voluntary systems intended to measure and report key indicators of cost, quality and student success (see <http://PresidentsForum.Excelsior.edu>).

Of the various outcomes being discussed, none has received more attention than that of student retention. While acknowledging the difficulty in measuring this particular aspect of higher education (due to non-continuous enrollment, transfers and student goals which fall short of degree attainment), the Spellings Commission on Higher Education has drawn attention to the fact that students (young and old) are leaving college early and that the overall percentage of post-secondary degree holders in the work force is now less than 25% of the adult population. The Commission goes on to point out that “if current trends continue, the proportion of workers with college degrees will decrease and the per capita personal income of Americans will fall over the next fifteen years”.¹

Regulator attention and the ability to maintain access to student financial aid (the government’s club in insisting on outcome measurement and reporting), economic competitiveness and institutional reputation are but a few of the reasons why we should be paying close attention to student retention. It also happens to be good business.

Each year, America’s colleges and universities spend billions of dollars on student recruitment (the University of Phoenix alone spends over \$500 million annually).² Despite such expenditures, and the competitiveness which they represent, the factor which influences enrollment decisions may have less to do with costly advertising than the verifiable outcome data that secretary Spellings and her Commission are advocating.

Eduventures, a Boston-based education research organization stated in a spring 2006 report that effective adult student recruitment for online programs is shifting from “aspirational,” claim-based appeals (i.e. “ours is the oldest, largest, best program”) to what Eduventures calls “evidence-based” recruiting (i.e. “90% of our students finish within X years”).³ Completion rates are increasingly being seen as one means of determining program attractiveness and, rightly or wrongly, quality.

It can be contended that one of the reasons for the long-term success of the much maligned *U.S. News and World Report* rankings is the public's hunger for data with which to make comparisons and application decisions. The belief that the measurement process is flawed, does not take away from the fact that there is a need for information that will enable students to make informed choices. The degree to which they can do this may be reflected in institutional "fits" that lead to student satisfaction and retention.

Those involved in the delivery of online and extended degree programs, have been wrestling with the student attrition-retention question well before the Spellings Commission. In doing so, they have come to learn that "attrition" and "retention" are not necessarily the same. "Attrition" it is suggested, has to do with the reasons for a student failing to reach a specified goal or endpoint. Typically reasons for high drop-out, or "attrition," rates include – cost, lack of time, work or family pressures, difficulty with subject matter, poor study skills, etc. "Retention," on the other hand, has to do with those efforts that an institution can take in the hope of keeping a student to the point of goal attainment which, interestingly, may not be the earning of a degree (at least not from our institution, or at this point in time). Examples of retention strategies include – selective enrollment criteria, an array of financial aid options, tutoring support, cohort-based instructional formats, etc.

Efforts to reduce attrition and increase retention may not be all that is needed to create student success. For instance, adult friendly policies that encourage enrollment and completion "on your schedule" may have great appeal, offer flexibility, and lead to a high level of retention, but not lead to student success. For instance, fewer than 50% of those enrolled in one highly regarded independent study program complete their coursework after multiple years. Fewer than 25% of those enrolled in the self-directed, online financial planning program of another name institution complete even the initial course of the curriculum within a year of enrollment. These examples are in contrast to those online degree programs where students participate in highly structured, cohort programs that require adherence to a fixed schedule and offer no electives. Here, over 90% complete.

There are many factors which might explain the above differences, other than the element of structure. The point to be made is that the *retention* of students does not necessarily equate to their success.

In developing the design for a student success model input has been sought from colleagues in the online and extended degree community in the U.S., as well as the presidents of open and distance learning (ODL) institutions abroad. From these conversations, has come the understanding that efforts need to commence before the point of enrollment, and continue through graduation.

Pre-enrollment

Prior to enrolling in a program, it is important that the prospective student and the institution become acquainted. For the prospect, it is important that they understand program expectations, unique aspects of the delivery mode (if online) and the nature of the support available. For the institution, it is important that they have a sense of the prospect's commitment to the program. It has been said that no level of support will overcome a lack of desire on the part of the student.

In the online arena, there has been a perception by some that it is an easier way to learn than classroom instruction (perhaps we have oversold the convenience factor). Giving prospective students the opportunity to sample an online course in advance is one way to help ensure an appropriate fit, and set realistic expectations.

For open enrollment programs, there is a need to walk the fine line between giving someone the *opportunity* of a learning experience and creating the impression that anyone can do it, regardless of background, motivation, or clarity of purpose. Some have suggested that we sow the seeds for our future retention problems when in our haste to make a recruiting target, we overlook a prospect's lack of focus or drive.

Money is one of the most frequently given reasons for premature student withdrawal. Given the rapid and steep rise of tuition at many institutions, and the complexity in applying for federal financial assistance, there is no denying that cost can be a substantial barrier. Thus, detailed financial aid counseling on the front-end can be a basis for competitive advantage in enrolling students and a contributing factor in keeping them. The student who understands what they can expect to receive, when they can expect to receive it and what they have to do in order to maintain entitlement, is more likely to remain enrolled than one who feels surprised by unknown aid requirements or benefit limits along the way.

Enrollment

Much has been written about identifying "at risk" students early. Less has been said about how to do this and exactly what forms of support should be offered to those so defined.

The use of a mandatory, up front "placement" exam has been adopted by many U.S. and international institutions as a way to conduct academic triage. Students are matched with advising and support services depending upon the level of need identified. Especially weak students may require remediation in one or more subject areas and frequent interaction with an advisor, for instance. While another student may only require periodic monitoring and access to a peer study group or tutor.

Regardless of whether an entrance exam is used, and how an individual student performs, there is widespread agreement that an orientation program for ALL can head-off early frustration and down stream problems. For online programs, training in how to use the

learning management system (LMS) and any other required software should be required of both students and faculty. The assumption that adult students do not need such assistance has not been found valid.

For those students who may require some form of remediation, caution needs to be exercised as to how this is delivered. In addition to being sensitive to a student's self-image, such programs need to be delivered in a form that meets tuition assistance or financial aid requirements (if it doesn't carry credit toward degree requirements, it may not qualify for third-party support). Some institutions have incorporated writing and math remediation modules into credit-bearing "first courses" that also include study skill training and introductions to essential subject matter. While this may be seen as primarily applying to undergraduate programs, the reality is that many graduate students are also weak in writing and math.

On-Going Support

In addition to such expected resources as a library and an academic advisor, students may also need tutoring from time to time. A growing number of institutions are outsourcing this service and, in some cases, absorbing the cost. PhD qualified tutors from U.S. institutions are now offering such support from overseas on a 7/24 basis.

Cohort groups have been found to be effective alternatives to formal tutoring, especially at the graduate level. Online students in cohesive cohorts are often seen as the preferred resource in helping fellow students through difficult material.

"Coaching" is another important form of support. It differs from tutoring in that the focus is not on academic content. Often requiring more listening than advice, such coaching typically focuses on those life circumstances which come between the student and completion of their program – work, family, time, money, focus.

A number of commercial coaching services are now available to assist institutions in providing this form of student support. Their claimed impact on student persistence is impressive. However, many institutions see coaching as an element of the advising process or as part of the faculty-student relationship. A pro-active plan whereby the institution regularly checks in with the student and indicates its concern and commitment to the student's ultimate success is considered key. In the ideal model, students will feel supported by the institution, fellow students and, most of all, by their faculty. Anecdotal evidence confirms that a caring instructor is the most often cited contributor to student persistence and course completion.

In developing a student success program one of the hurdles that must be dealt with is that of historical mind set. Many faculty and administrators in adult education believe that high drop rates among older students are to be expected, "it's just the nature of our business." Yet, when pressed, these same administrators will acknowledge that they have offered few, if any, of the support services described above.

In the final analysis it is contended that we have a moral obligation to recognize that all who come to us are not equally prepared for the programs we offer. If we are to accept the students money and offer them the prospect of eventual success, we must be prepared to deal with their differences and their areas of special need. If we cannot, we should not extend admission.

How do we cover the cost of these various services? This is an important question in planning a student success model. Some institutions build in the expenses involved, including those of external service providers. Others offer particular services as options paid for by the student. Utilization in the latter case tends to be less and reported results are not as significant as when support services are seen as part of the institution's commitment to the student.

An important point to consider is that made by customer service professionals who tell us that it costs seven times more money to recruit a new customer as to retain an existing one. If this holds true for higher education, attention to student success should help us meet revenue and enrollment goals, while adding the needed services. Such an effort also contributes to a cycle of success-for our students, our institutions and our society.

NOTES:

1. "Per Capita Income of the U.S. Workforce Projected to Decline *IF* Education Doesn't Improve," The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, undated.
2. Annual Report – Apollo Group, 2006.
3. "Competing in Online Higher Education," Eduventures, February 2006.