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Critical Assessment and Strategies for Increased Student Retention



Ruth Claire Black

Critical Assessment and Strategies for Increased Student Retention

Student retention has become a difficult issue within higher education. As such, it is imperative to examine the causes, as well as provide educators with strategies to implement to improve retention rates.

Critical Assessment and Strategies for Increased Student Retention is a pivotal reference source for the latest progressive research on a variety of current student success and attendance perpetuation issues. Featuring a broad range of coverage on a number of perspectives and topics, such as academic performance, counseling, and culture, this publication is geared towards practitioners, academicians, and researchers interested in understanding the difficulties with maintaining student retention.

Topics Covered:

- Academic Performance
- Counseling
- Culture
- Gender
- Race
- Self-Efficacy
- Social Inequality
- Socio-Economic Status



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Ruth Claire Black
Namseoul University, South Korea

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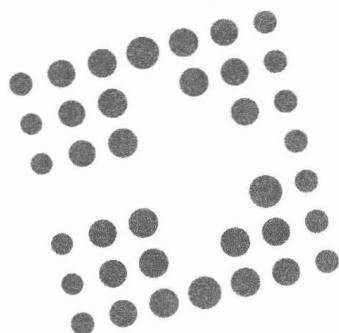
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Foreword

Critical Assessment and Strategies for Increased Student Retention is an important and pivotal reference resource that will advance retention and student success efforts at a wide range of academic institutions in the US and abroad. It is also long overdue that we have access to a book which illustrates a range of best practices and approaches to improving student success and retention. Ruth Claire Black, after her time leading Cal State Online and previously starting Brandman University's online efforts, is the right person to assemble this work.

Higher Education is experiencing the convergence of a number of long-term trends which may ultimately cause significant changes in how future students are educated. Many institutions are already at the crossroads of how to respond to these trends. The most significant trend is the decrease in the number of college enrollments. While recently the number of high school graduates has increased, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data suggest that college enrollment rates and the number of enrollments have actually decreased for the fifth straight year. For the most recent year the decrease in enrollments was 1.4%.

The emergence of non-traditional educational providers is creating lower cost pathways for high school graduates. Coding academies started by providing accelerated, focused coding training with assured job placement for graduates. Some are now expanding offerings by leveraging the same business model for areas such as marketing, business, data analytics, project management, and computer assisted design.

Other providers are utilizing massive open online courses (MOOC's) or low cost/no cost online classes to reduce the number of courses a student must take when they do enroll in their degree granting institution. It is also becoming more acceptable for high school graduates to opt for trades that provide middle class income while avoiding the time, expense and debt of a traditional institution.

These trends have resulted in significant competition for the decreasing number of college enrollments, especially of high school graduates who opt to take the traditional pathway from high school to college. At the same time, the selection criteria that students consider when choosing an institution are shifting. In the past, inputs were important in evaluating an institution; now, outcomes have assumed a more important role in the process of college selection.

The exploding student debt crisis is an overriding concern of students. In the past ten years median salaries have stagnated while during the same period the increase in education costs have far exceeded inflation. It is no wonder that student debt has exploded to over \$1.4 trillion. Borrowing to fund an education is a great investment if one graduates in a major that has good job prospects; however, it is a disaster if one incurs debt and fails to graduate, which is why institutions with low graduation rates have high default rates. This trend is why graduation rates are becoming a more important factor considered by prospective students.

Foreword

Currently, the federal government, through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), published each institution's graduation rate for first-time, full-time freshmen who start in the fall of each year. This graduation rate is not relevant for the majority of students who now graduate from the second or third institution that they attend. For the past two years IPEDS has been collecting non-first-time graduation rate information and this year, is expected to publish both first-time and non-first-time graduation rates. The availability of the non-first-time graduation rates will, for the first time, provide transfer students with useful information on how to compare institutions and select an institution where they are more likely to graduate. It will also be useful in developing university rankings for institutions who serve transfer students.

As we see the growing importance of graduation rates, the importance of retention comes into focus. Evaluating retention rates each year will facilitate continuous improvements that will ultimately lead to higher graduation rates. While retention rates may differ a bit in meaning in traditional and non-traditional institutions, they provide an annual result that will be used to set goals and measure progress.

In an environment where institutions are competing over a decreasing number of enrollments, it will become more expensive to enroll new students. This will tilt the economics to make it more favorable to expend additional resources to retain current students and this is why this book on the best thinking in the field of retention is so timely, useful and important.

As you read *Critical Assessment and Strategies for Increased Student Retention*, you will see that incremental improvement in retention can be achieved by focusing on improving existing systems and by using sophisticated data tools and predictive analytics. You will also note that greater improvements can be achieved by focusing on adopting best practices. While a cross departmental retention committee can be helpful, like anything else, executive leadership of a university wide effort will produce the best results.

As the leader of Brandman University, when we transitioned from being Chapman University College, we had the opportunity to change everything, and that is what we did based upon our research of best practices for retention and student success. Changes included:

- All students receive success coaching
- Creating a dual advising model where each student has a dedicated adviser
- Creating one-stop student services
- Designing and implementing an online writing and math community
- Transitioning all on ground classes to the blended class format
- Ensuring that students can take classes on ground or online or both
- Six 8 week sessions per school year to reduce time to degree
- Focus on relevant curriculum with DQP and AAC&U LEAP competencies embedded

Brandman serves a non-traditional student body that is 40% from underrepresented groups, 46% of whom receive Pell grants, 49% first generation and 24% active military and veterans. Yet, a few months ago when we reported to IPEDS non-first-time, full-time graduation rates for our 2008 cohort our six-year graduation rate was 82% and our eight-year rate was 83%, with a 4% cohort default rate.

When a student begins or restarts their educational journey, coaching may enable them to successfully make the transition. During busy times at home or work, being able to shift to online classes might enable a student to persist. Accelerated 8 week sessions are beneficial to many students and having a dedicated adviser that gets to know the student and their needs could prove to be the difference.

There is not a magic bullet to retention. High retention and graduation rates are the result of adopting best practices that are the most relevant to the students you serve. Critical Assessment and Strategies for Increased Student Retention is an essential tool in identifying and implementing the best practices that will be most effective in enhancing your student's success.

Gary Brahm
Brandman University, USA

Preface

I wanted to produce this book for well over a decade and I have notes referring to ideas and possible content areas for the book dating all the way back to 1997. However, over the last seven years, the need for a comprehensive and critical look at retention and student success became more intense and clear.

For me, the scrutiny of retention rates and student success in online, blended, and face-to-face programs steadily intensified after the U.S. Department of Education's 2010 report confirmed what I had believed for years, that "students in online conditions performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction" and that "online learning is superior as a medium" (p. xvi, xviii, original emphasis). In addition, in 2010 President Barack Obama delivered an important speech on education during which he said, "over a third of America's college students and over half of our minority students don't earn a degree, even after six years. So, we don't just need to open the doors of college to more Americans; we need to make sure they stick with it through graduation. That is critical" (President Obama, 2010, para. 34).

We simply need to do better at retaining our college students through to graduation. From my own teaching and administrative experiences, principally in online education at both public and private non-profit institutions, I believed that the 2010 U.S. Department of Education's report on online education was correct. Yet, why was retention in online programs continuing to significantly lag face-to-face programs; why were self-reported measures of student success lower in online programs and non-traditional student communities; and why, given all of the attention and efforts at improvement, wasn't the gap narrowing?

The moment when I finally committed to delivering this book came in early 2015 when I first read the proposed regulatory package that came to be known as the Gainful Employment Act by the U.S. Department of Education. It was then that I realized that efforts to regulate, shape and limit education opportunities were squarely focused on retention rates. Retention rates were the tipping point for determining a host of important education and societal issues, such as financial aid, university rankings, professional job opportunities, community participation and social impact, to name just a few. It has taken almost three years since that moment of total commitment to produce this book; but, it has been time well spent.

Various reviews of the literature over the years confirmed the significant retention and student success gap between online and face-to-face programs (Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson & Swan, 2009). The literature also confirmed that non-traditional and non-first-time students, especially those enrolled in online programs, have retention rates that are significantly lower than those of first time freshmen (Hill, 2010). Further, retention has been and continues to be a difficult problem to assess due to the retention gap between first time freshman and non-first-time students, and between programs; face-to-face, blended and online. The gap in retention has not appreciably narrowed over the last twenty years (Allen

& Seaman, 2015). As demonstrated in the literature, improving retention rates requires comprehensive institution-wide strategies that systemically tackle extensive and pervasive problems (Hill, 2010).

Since the release of the Spellings Report in 2006, U.S. based post-secondary institutions have been under pressure to become more transparent about retention and graduation rates (United States Department of Education, 2006). Two years after the Spellings Report, the federal government amended the Higher Education Act of 1965 to regulate and mandate disclosure and annual reporting of graduation and retention data as well as cost of attendance (Kelly & Schneider, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2009). Government and accreditation agency pressures to improve outcomes and raise graduation rates have been steadily building for the last decade. Universities are increasingly being evaluated in relation to their retention rates and critical aspects of education such as financial aid and institutional rankings now focus heavily on retention rates. Institutions need some practical approaches, best practices and new ideas to support them in meeting these rising expectations.

We simply must do a better job in retaining our college students to graduation. The data and knowledge about how to do better was out there. It just wasn't curated, organized, or structured in a practical and sensible way that would help scholars, politicians, institutions, and other education stakeholders understand the enormous and diverse issues, challenges and obstacles to retention that exist. We needed a "call to arms" on retention and student success that also provided a road map of how to move forward from whatever place a program or institution finds itself in when they commit to improving their retention rates.

What was needed was a way to inspire positive and practical action on retention and student success in a systematic, data driven, and process oriented way. From my experience, there were five key components to addressing the challenges: 1) a comprehensive set of studies devoted to "how to" assess the issues, challenges and obstacles, 2) a range of strategies to help close the retention gap that could be relevant and meaningful to a wide range of programs and institutions, 3) a comprehensive and critical assessment of retention and student success from the perspective of a wide range of university stakeholders, 4) the discussion needed to include faculty members, university administrators and staff members, as well as, governments, regulators, accreditation agencies, and technology and student support vendors, and 5) the discussion also needed to include a range of academic, teaching and learning institutions, organizations and corporations working at the post-secondary level, both in the U.S. and abroad.

This book collects case chapters of scholarly work, along with the specific road maps that could have practical and impactful results and success for a wide range of readers and audiences, in order to motivate, encourage, and inspire positive action within programs, institutions, and organizations. It is designed to communicate the issues, challenges, and obstacles to retention and student support work in diverse settings while setting a framework for approaches, strategies, processes and solutions to improve retention for many types of academic, teaching and training institutions and organizations.

The contributors offer a critical, yet practical perspective that is constructive and productive, rooted in how to understand and assess, and then, how to systematically address and improve retention and student success. The emphasis on practical research does not mean that the studies are isolated or removed from the academic literature and seminal studies in the areas of retention and student success. All of the chapters include literature review sections that contextualize their retention and student success work within the discipline. Each of the authors in the book describe plans for future research in their chapters. I expect that all of them will continue to periodically publish their subsequent findings on these important issues over the next several decades.

Preface

The contributors come from a wide range of perspectives, program levels and institution types, and deal with a broad range of retention issues, challenges and obstacles. In this collection, the reader is offered a multifaceted range of critical perspectives that are helpful, valuable and insightful no matter how uncomfortable some of the material and some of the data may prove for some readers. While contributions are mainly from North America, important contributions from Asia, Africa and Europe are also included.

The critical perspective and focus of the book is to emphasize that institutions must look closely at their program and institution retention rates, and then, carefully and strategically invest in resources, programs and processes to evaluate and improve them. The results of the research detailed in this book clearly illustrate that meaningful improvements in retention rates are possible, and that the longer the program or institution remains systematically committed to critical assessment and continuous improvement, the better. Improving retention requires a serious long term and comprehensive institution-wide commitment.

The book does not promote the legitimacy of specific retention approaches or theories, nor does it advocate for the acceptance or integration of specific retention rates and student success statistics into institutional assessment processes or ranking metrics. The chapter contributors were selected because of their attempts to move the field of retention and student success forward. They offer their best wisdom, recommendations, and solutions as a way to develop and then advance more effective ways of addressing the issues inevitably encountered in student retention, while maintaining a commitment to quality, data driven research. The authors are also mindful of their particular accreditation issues and their national education agendas. A critical foundation is either implied or overt in each chapter as each author attempts to reveal diverse retention issues of underlying concern that suggest the need to do things differently. Yet a common framework of dialog is apparent in the commitment to providing a better experience for students, faculty, and all the stakeholders involved in the post-secondary education process.

I am personally and professionally pleased to be the editor of this collection. I have connected with many wonderful scholars and practitioners while developing the content and learned much about this field in which I have so much invested. I am confident that the reader will gain valuable insight by reading these excellent case chapters. The chapters are divided into four sections: 1) Retention Perspectives and Approaches, 2) Supporting and Encouraging Student Success, 3) Assessing the Impact of Retention and Student Success Programs, and 4) Pedagogy and Program Design to Support Retention and Student Success.

In Section 1, "Retention Perspectives and Approaches," the chapters focus on the way that different approaches to retention in various teaching, learning and assessment contexts can be instructive. Markle and Rikoon's (1) chapter introduces us to non-cognitive factors in retention and explores individual characteristics and behaviors that increase the likelihood of a student persisting until graduation. It also provides approaches and tools for how to measure and assess these important retention factors. Canny's (2) essay focuses on the approach to retention and student success utilized in study abroad programs and suggests ways that programs and institutions can leverage these approaches to impact and improve retention on the home campus. Savas's (3) article provides a statistical model for understanding gender and race as critical retention factors and provides insights into the evaluation of this data for improved retention. Little, Gaier and Spoutz's (4) contribution emphasizes the importance of values, beliefs and culture in retention.

Section 2, “Supporting and Encouraging Student Success,” starts with a theoretical analysis by Hinton (5) of the factors that influence retention of freshmen students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The author details how to support retention and improve student success, as well as, institutional growth in the unique teaching and learning setting of the HBCU. Wilcox and Black (6) look beyond the academic institution for retention and student success lessons and solutions through an analysis of a multi-level marketing distributor operating in fifty countries. Cromlish (7) then introduces the concept of anonymous online learning as a student success tool. Eckmann (8) writes about a process and approach that helps at-risk, underrepresented and female students matriculate into an MBA program directly upon completion of the bachelor’s degree. To complete Section 2, Cromlish and Black (9) suggest a specialized coaching intervention to address systemic social and student success issues within the South Korean post-secondary education system.

In Section 3, “Assessing the Impact of Retention and Success Programs,” Nemeth (10) offers university administrators a process and a framework to assess and then improve academic advising. Baporikar (11) provides a holistic framework for assessing and then enhancing the rate of student retention using a master’s level program at a public Namibian University as a case study. Armstrong (12) then provides a comprehensive and systematic approach to assessing and then improving retention and student success using a private non-profit London based university as a case study.

In Section 4, “Pedagogy and Program Design to Support Retention and Student Success,” the contributors describe pedagogy and best practices for retention focused course design. Mancini, Cipher and Ganji (13) provide an approach to designing and developing retention-focused online instruction. The chapter is a case study based on their curriculum design experience with a fully online nursing program at a flagship public university system. Galloway (14) also focuses on designing online courses and programs with the “end in mind” and offers “Four Pillars” of engaged course design as a model. Watson, Moreland and Smith (15) describe a reading and literacy program as a case study of engaged, self-efficacious and impactful teaching and learning at a university with strong ties to the Cherokee Tribal Nation. Korstange and Krahenbuhl (16) study the mind and how learning is processed and stored and how to leverage this for retention and student success generally and within first-year experience courses specifically. To complete the section and the book, Estes (17) looks at the role of communication in teaching and learning and how best practices in communication can facilitate improved retention and student success.

I am confident that you will find the case chapters highly readable, informative, and provocative. The time spent reading this collection of practical studies and interconnecting experiences will be well-rewarded with valuable insights that are readily applicable in your professional activities.

Ruth Claire Black
Namseoul University, South Korea

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Ruth Claire Black
Namseoul University, South Korea