

# An Overview of Student Retention Research

by Richard Dumaresq

There are many theories and notions on how schools can best retain students. Until recently though, there were very few studies or little hard research on what causes students to stay in school or drop out.

The following information outlines recent research studies in student persistence, why students drop out and the best retention practices. While there is no magic bullet, a school staff incorporating some of these suggestions in a well-formulated plan **with consistent follow-through** will see positive results.

### Early Warning Systems

Staff support networks and assessment systems to monitor students who are struggling with academics, money or personal issues are critical for retention according to George Kuh of Indiana University at Bloomington. Before a school can provide resources to students, they need to be able to find out, early on, which students are under stress or having trouble hanging on.

**Comment:** *Check in with each student on a weekly basis with short, simple surveys, brief talks or student peer mentor checks.*

### Why Students Leave

The University of New Mexico found that students dropped out for the following reasons (in rank order).

1. students were running out of money
2. they were unable to get into required classes
3. they couldn't get advisement or someone to talk to
4. work, family and personal demands created overwhelming pressures

**Comment:** *Institutions need to have resources ready to address each of these factors quickly. Resources need to be in place well before the situations arise for students.*

### NASFAA Research on Credit Card Use

Seventy-one percent of college students are using credit cards to fill the average six-thousand-dollar gap between financial aid and the actual cost of attending college.

Students then become more likely to become delinquent on the card and drop out of school once the debt builds up.

**Comment:** *Urge students not to use credit cards and check in with those who you suspect may be using them.*

### Why Community College Students Drop Out

In "The Social Prerequisites of Success," James Rosenbaum, Northwestern

University and Regina Deil-Amen, Penn State, found that community colleges, more so than private schools, place subtle and hidden obstacles that hinder non-traditional, disadvantaged students from completing their programs.

**“At-risk” students attending community colleges usually do not have the social know-how to successfully navigate a large, impersonal, bureaucratic system on their own.**

### The Seven Obstacles That Lead to Dropping Out

1. **Bureaucratic Hurdles** – complexity of enrollment, filling out forms with no help, registering for classes, no support applying for financial aid, making complex class choices, efficiently accumulating credits towards a degree.
2. **Confusing Choices** – complex course catalogs and class schedules, plus the lack of structured guidance.
3. **Student-Initiated Assistance** – requiring students to initiate all help processes on their own (course approvals, tutoring, counseling problems, etc.).
4. **Limited Counselor Availability** – too many students for too few counselors, needing to schedule well in advance, students not knowing what the problem really is.
5. **Poor Advice from Staff** – conflicting opinions, guided into classes that were unneeded, wasted time and classes, lack of detailed knowledge about their students, staff not understanding program requirements.
6. **Delayed Detection of Costly Mistakes** – classes offered at vastly different times of day, classes not offered every semester/quarter.
7. **Poor Handling of Conflicting Demands** – illness, financial need, child care, unanticipated pregnancy, car breakdowns and student work.

**Comment:** *Make sure your school helps all students “navigate the system.”*

The findings from another community college study, the “Survey of Entering Student Engagement,” may offer some clues as to why students leave, and what officials can do to make them stay.

Community colleges typically lose about half of their students prior to the students’ second year, the survey noted.

Among the key findings:

- Only a third of respondents said that in the first few weeks of the term, an advisor helped them set academic goals and devise a plan to achieve them.
- Forty-one percent said they never used academic-planning services in the first few weeks.
- Less than a third said a financial-aid staff member helped them analyze their needs for financial aid.
- Only thirty-eight percent said they attended an on-campus orientation before classes began,

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while 20 percent said they were not aware of an orientation program or course.

The key to making new students feel comfortable and welcome means placing them in small groups with their peers, according to the study.

**Comment:** *Connect every student in a meaningful way with other students or positive role models and give them a lot of support in orientation, academic planning and financial aid assistance.*

### Learning to Learn

Thomson Learning College found the following key retention factors.

Besides great teaching, which actively engages students, the study found that retention increased when the following student development factors were supported by the school:

- students attended class regularly
- students learned to set a schedule for studying
- students learned time management skills and the ways they learn best

**Comment:** *The process skills of learning how to learn can be just as important to success as learning the content.*

### Long Breaks Don't Help

“The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College” by Clifford Adelman concluded that students who take long breaks from their courses are at great risk of not graduating at all.

**Comment:** *Leaves of absence should be used sparingly, if at all, and only in extreme circumstances.*

### The Sense of Connection

A Syracuse University study by Vincent Tinto found that students who face identical intellectual, financial and personal obstacles can vary widely in deciding to drop out.

The key is “how well the students believe they fit in at a particular institution.”

“Participation in clubs...student support groups and frequent interaction with faculty and advisors outside of class were all associated with low dropouts.”

**Comment:** *Do students believe they belong at your school? Feel welcome? Have they established a real bond with a staff member, a group of students or a club?*

### Study Groups

Regina Deil-Amen from Penn State University found that being an active participant in a study group was the most powerful motivator to remain in school, reducing a student's odds of dropping out by 28 percent.

**Comment:** *Study groups are one way to enhance the “connection” or “bond” with the school.*

### Success-Driven Retention

A study by the University of Nevada at Reno found that early academic success at that school curbed dropouts. Small, quick academic successes influenced low-income students to stay in school.

One Pennsylvania school reported that they have used this retention approach and had positive results. The school had students complete an individual project in their major by the end of the first or second week and a small group project at the end of the first month. The school reported that the completed work gave students a sense of accomplishment and, for some, a first taste of success.

**Comment:** *Early success makes students want to come back for more.*

### Tutoring, Grants and the Questionable Value of Remedial Courses

Recent studies by researchers at MIT, Harvard and the University of Toronto found that two factors were significant in retaining students. The first was tutoring and academic support services (success type programs). The second was financial grant incentives offered at the end or middle of the first year. Harvard researchers found that tuition aid improved women's completion rates more than it did men's.

While tutoring has shown positive results in retention as well as academic success, remedial courses “do not have much long-term influence on student success...and are either slightly positive, slightly negative or zero,” according to Bridget Terrylong, an associate professor of

education and economics at Harvard University and Juan Carlos Calegno, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College. Their results “suggest remediation has limited or mixed benefits.”

Taking a remedial reading course, for example, did not have any bearing on persistence, and the students who took such classes were actually less likely to pass college-level English composition classes.

Another study by Isaac McFarland at the University of Texas at Dallas and Francisco Martorell, an associate economist at the RAND Corporation, did not find any evidence that students who took remedial reading or mathematics classes were more likely to earn a college degree than comparably prepared students who went straight into academic classes. In fact, at two-year colleges where a large proportion of students took remedial courses, those students were significantly less likely than other comparably prepared students to complete at least one year of college or earn a degree.

**Comment:** *Placing students in remedial courses at the start of their educational experience has several detrimental effects. It keeps them from their major—what they are in school for and interested in. For some students remedial courses may send a signal that they can’t “cut it” in school; for others it may stigmatize them. Remedial courses may also inhibit the bonding process between the student and the school by inferring that “you don’t belong here; you can’t do the work.”*

*Tutoring, on the other hand, while using actual course material, may well be a better strategy for academic success and the student persistence that follows from that approach.*

Much of the previous research is common sense. Schools know they should do these things to retain students. But it is only through consistent, sustained focus on implementing these approaches—by everyone in the school—that retention can be improved.