

## Section 1

**WHAT DO WE KNOW  
ABOUT RETENTION AND  
PERSISTENCE TO DEGREE?**

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# 1

## **DEFINING, REFINING PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT SUCCESS**

Defining *retention*, *attrition*, and *persistence* and the constructs related to those terms is fraught with pitfalls and complexity. In the most simplistic form, a student is retained if that student remains in continuous full-time enrollment from the point of matriculation to the completion of a degree. Although this straightforward definition may have been appropriate prior to the last half of the twentieth century, Hagedorn (2005) suggests that defining and measuring student retention is one of the most vexing measurement issues in higher education. This chapter will focus on describing the evolution of various terms that have been used, sometimes interchangeably, to define the outcomes of higher education from the institution's perspective and from the student's perspective. Tracing the use of these terms, we suggest that student failure to succeed in college was once seen as a student shortcoming that eventually shifted to an institutional responsibility. Currently, the terms in vogue are those that delineate the interaction between students and institutions as the nexus of student success. Though we applaud these current approaches to understanding student success in college, we close this chapter by offering a critique of current definitions and accountability measures as too narrow and too institution-centric to bring about dramatic increases in student success.

## Terms Associated with Students

Terms defining the behavior of students are in great abundance. These terms can be divided into three viewpoints: students who persist, students who leave but persist elsewhere, and students who leave.

### Students Who Persist

A student who persists is one who continues to enroll at the institution after matriculation. Although this seems like a fairly straightforward description of a persister, there are several definitions with not-so-subtle variations. Lenning (1978) suggests that a persister is one who enrolls continuously without interruption. In addition to continuous enrollment, Astin (1975) adds full-time status and pursuit of a degree as qualifiers. And, in identifying a persister as a stayer, Guthrie (2002) adds the expectation of graduation in about four (or two) years. The resulting definition becomes enormously complex: a persister is a student who enrolls full-time, continuously pursues a degree with the expectation of graduation in about four (or two) years. And, as the qualifiers are added, fewer and fewer students can be called persisters. Perhaps the *Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (2002) definition of a persister applies here: a person who “goes on resolutely or stubbornly despite opposition, importunity, or warning: to continue firmly or obstinately.”

### Students Who Leave But (May or May Not) Persist Elsewhere

The literature describes several types of students who progress toward their educational objectives but are not characterized by the one-institution, continuous-progress, and timely graduation constraints of the traditional definition of persistence.

Among the most prominent of these groups is the *part-time student*. The National Center for Educational Statistics

(2002) reports that 38% of undergraduate students are pursuing higher education on a part-time basis. A subcategory of part-time students is the *slowdown*, identified in Guthrie (2002) as a student who remains enrolled but moves from full-time to part-time status.

The term *transfer student* identifies a significant number of undergraduates. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2001) reported that 28.9% of community college students transferred to four-year colleges. Although data on transfers between four-year colleges and transfers from four-year to two-year colleges are limited, Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002) found that 41% of students in their study attended more than one institution during their college career and 32% had changed colleges at least once.

The *stopout* is the third prominent category of student who does not pursue a traditional path to a degree. Astin (1975) defines a stopout as a student who “interrupts education for a relatively brief period of time and returns to complete a degree” (p. 9).

Lenning (1978) is less restrictive in defining the stopout. He omits the word “brief” from his definition, thus expanding the length of time that a student may be considered a stopout. One might safely assume that the increases in time to degree reported by Adelman (2004) suggest that stopping out is on the increase. Yet, stopout behavior is impossible to measure, for there is no real agreement on the length of time a student can be considered a stopout before becoming a *dropout*.

Over the past few years, the concept of *swirling* has been applied to attendance patterns of college students. In its basic form, swirling is defined as achieving a higher education degree via enrollment at two or more institutions simultaneously. Although swirling is very difficult to measure, Berkner et al. (2002) found that 11% of students in the study were simultaneously enrolled in more than one college. Undoubtedly, these figures would be far higher if these students were asked to

identify other ways (including online courses taken from other institutions) in which they earned college credit.

### **Students Who Leave**

Bean (1990) suggests that, far too often, terms describing students who leave an institution have been pejorative in nature and usually focused on student shortcomings. Woodring (1968) suggested that “many of the students now in college have no sound reason for being there, and would not have entered if they had been given valid information” (p. 13). Pervin, Reik, and Dalrymple (1966) focused on educational preparedness as a primary cause of attrition and suggested that the dropout rates would be substantially reduced by raising minimum high school grade point averages and standardized test scores required for admission. Other causes for dropping out include nonacademic reasons: boredom, financial hardship, lack of motivation, and mental and physical health (Cope & Hannah, 1975). Also cited in the early literature were personal and social maladjustment, marriage, job opportunities, and lack of motivation to succeed. Regardless of the multiple causes of departure, nearly one-third of all students who enter higher education each year will not return to the institution for a second year (ACT, 2010e), a statistic that has remained relatively constant over the past five decades.

The operant descriptor of student departure is the term *dropout*, an antonym to *persist*. A dropout is a student who “is not enrolled, has not earned a degree, and is no longer pursuing a degree” (Astin, 1975, p. 9). Summerskill (1962) states that a dropout is a “student who leaves college before advancing their education to the point of earning a degree” (p. 627). Similar definitions are offered by Pervin et al. (1966), Lenning (1978), Guthrie (2002), and a host of others. Other terms which attribute departure to student shortcomings include *underachievers* (Keniston, 1966), *nonpersisters* (Astin, 1975), *stayouts* (Horn, 1998), and *discontinued students* (Iffert, 1957).

There is one positive description in the literature of a student who leaves the institution with no intention of returning. Lenning (1978) describes an *attainer* as a student who drops out prior to graduation but after attaining a particular goal. Although not using the descriptor attainer, Hossler, Bean, and Associates (1990) describe a group of students who enroll in college, get from it what they want, and go on about their lives.

It should be noted here that in virtually all of the literature prior to 1975, the causality for attrition is attributed to student characteristics with virtually no causality assigned to the institution (ACT, 2010e). Chapter Eleven of this book points to the fact that even today, student characteristics are seen as the primary contributors to attrition, whereas institutional characteristics are believed to make minimal contributions to attrition.

## **Terms Associated with Institutions**

The terms associated with institutions differ markedly in a number of ways from the definitions associated with students. First of all, the institutional terms do not define a behavior or an action. In addition, they are aggregate descriptors of a cohort of students rather than terms applied to individual students. As such they are always expressed as rates or percentages (for example, the retention rate for last fall's first-time, full-time, degree-seeking cohort was 68%). Finally, the terms associated with institutions are value neutral; in and of themselves, the terms are neither positive or negative. It is only when they are compared to external benchmarks or institutional goals that they take on meaning.

### **Retention**

A review of early literature leads to the conclusion that the term *retention* as applied to college student enrollment patterns was not widely used until the 1970s. Prior to 1966, no ERIC

documents referred to college student retention. Prominent books in the student development field (Lloyd-Jones & Smith, 1954; Mueller, 1961; Williamson, 1961) contain no references to retention. And early publications that focused on student departure almost universally refer to dropouts, stopouts, and other terms that characterized individual student behavior (and, for the most part, negatively). By 1980, the literature on departure began to feature the term *retention* as an approach to describing departure behavior at the institutional level. *Retention* appeared in the titles of several books and monographs. Among those publications were Lenning, Sauer, and Beal (1980); Beal and Noel (1981); and Noel, Levitz, Saluri, and Associates (1986).

Retention is usually expressed as a rate or percentage of students who return from one enrollment period to another. But, as Lenning et al. (1980) pointed out, retention can have several definitions:

1. Program completion as retention
  - a. Graduating in the time designated for the degrees or certificates offered
  - b. Graduating after the time designated for the degrees or certificates offered
  - c. Graduating (at any time) at the institution of initial entry
  - d. Graduating from an institution other than the one in which initially enrolled
  - e. Graduating in the curricular program initially entered
  - f. Graduating in a curricular program other than the one in which initially enrolled
2. Course or term completion as retention
3. Personal Goal attainment as retention (pp. 6–7)

Although these interpretations captured the nuances of institutional retention, there was (and continues to be) little



agreement among institutions as to how retention should be measured: Which students would be included? What about students who fail academically or those who stop out or those who transfer in or out? Hagedorn (2005) believes that higher education researchers may never reach a consensus on the definition and measurement of retention.

In an effort to standardize the collection and reporting of data on all colleges receiving federal student assistance, the federal government established the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) in 1993. Among many other data elements, the IPEDS system collects information on enrollment, completion, and graduation rates. In that process, IPEDS has standardized the definition of retention as the percentage of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students from the previous fall who either reenrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. The simplicity of the IPEDS definition, however, reflects Hagedorn's contention. At its best, the definition standardizes the reporting of retention. And at its worst, it reflects a most narrow definition of student success.

As a final commentary on the use of the word *retention*, the dictionary defines retention as holding or continuing to hold in possession or use. *Attrition*, an antonym of retention, is defined as the condition of being worn down or ground down by friction.

Retention, then, is a measure of the rate at which institutions reduce friction that stands in the way of a student's continued enrollment.

### **Graduation/Completion/Persistence to Degree**

There has been only limited debate on the definition of graduation, completion, and persistence to degree. These are interchangeable terms always expressed as the rate or percentage of students who complete a degree within a specified time period. The IPEDS Graduation Rates survey collects information about student graduation rates by gender and race or ethnicity

by tracking a cohort of undergraduates and their completion status at 150% of normal time (six years for four-year degrees and three years for two-year degrees). A cohort includes full-time, first-time, degree- or certificate-seeking students who enter college either during the fall term or during the 12-month period between September 1 of one year and August 31 of the next year and are enrolled in courses creditable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other award. Like the IPEDS definition of retention, the graduation rate survey standardizes the collection of data, and although it recognizes that college completion does not always take place in two years or four years, it is still a linear definition that fails to account for students who transfer, those who swirl, and those who stop out for prolonged periods of time.

### **Progression**

Often overlooked in discussion of student departure behavior is the concept of progression. It is defined as the percentage of first-time, full-time, and degree-seeking students who reenroll and achieve a class standing commensurate with the number of years they have attended. On the surface, it is a positive that these students are retained at the institution. Yet, students who fail to progress or keep pace with their cohort group are at risk of dropping out of the institution at a later date. Progression may be hindered by academic performance or by injudicious course withdrawals.

### **Terms Associated with Interaction Between Student and Institution**

Since the mid-1970s several theoretical perspectives have been proposed and tested. Each of these theories is included in this chapter because they describe the interface between the student and the institution. The theories are described only briefly here because greater detail is included in Chapter Two.

## **Involvement**

Alexander Astin first articulated the construct of involvement in *Preventing Students from Dropping Out* (1975) and in so doing, hinted at an institutional role in student success. Involvement focuses on the amount of energy a student invests in the academic experience. Involvement is both physical and psychological and emanates from both qualitative and quantitative academic and social experiences. The basic tenet of involvement is that students learn more the more they are involved in both the academic and social aspects of the collegiate experience. Astin defines a highly involved student as one who “devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students” (1999, p. 1). That is, greater participation in meaningful experiences on campus leads to learning and to personal growth. Clearly, the campus plays a role in involvement: the type and structure of learning experiences inside and outside the classroom and campus programs and policies are related to involvement. Because significant learning takes place outside the classroom, the role of extracurricular activities figures prominently in the research on involvement.

## **Integration**

Educational sociologist Vincent Tinto introduced the concepts of social and academic integration. Although Astin’s theory of involvement began the dialogue on the relationship between the student and the institution, Tinto believed that institutional factors were pivotal to understanding student departure (1993). His theory of integration posited that student departure is a result of the extent to which students come to share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty and the extent to which students adhere to the structural rules and requirements of the institution—the institutional culture.

## **Engagement**

George Kuh (2001) advanced Astin's earlier work and incorporated Chickering and Gamson's definition (1987) of best practices in undergraduate education into the concept of student engagement. Student engagement includes two tenets. First, student success is more likely to occur as students increase the time and effort they put into their studies and other activities. Second, student success is more likely to occur when the institution focuses resources on organizing learning opportunities and services and encourages students to participate in and benefit from such activities.

## **Reflections on the Definitions and Constructs**

In reviewing the definitions and constructs related to retention, it becomes clear that our understanding of and response to student departure behavior continue to evolve. Several factors support this assertion. First, there is increasing recognition that the causes of student departure are not confined solely to student shortcomings. Early research on student departure behavior focused almost entirely on student academic preparation, test scores, socioeconomic status, sex, parent level of education, family wealth, attitudes, and commitment to goals. Although these student characteristics, particularly academic preparation, are still critical to the retention equation, it is clear that decisions about departure or continuation reside at the confluence of institutional programs or services and student characteristics.

A second reflection on our understanding of retention is that the perspective and the terminology accompanying it are shifting, albeit slowly, from the pejorative (Bean, 1990) to the affirmative: from the glass is half empty to the glass is half full. Though such a shift may seem inconsequential, the use of terminology illustrates the importance of the shift. The following definitions from the Merriam-Webster Third New International Dictionary (2002) illustrate this point.

Below are terms found in the early literature, with negative connotations.

- **Dropout:** one who leaves school before achieving her or his goal
- **Persister:** a person who goes on resolutely or stubbornly despite opposition, importunity, or warning; one who continues firmly or obstinately
- **Retention:** holding or continuing to hold in one's possession
- **Attrition:** the condition of being worn down or ground down by friction

Even the titles of early publications included such terminology. Among those publications are *Preventing Students from Dropping Out* (Astin, 1975), *Reducing the Dropout Rate* (Noel, 1978), and *Leaving College: The Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Tinto, 1993).

Although terms such as *retention* and *attrition* continue in wide use as aggregate descriptors of institutional functioning, these terms are also negative by definition. It seems obvious that institutions would prefer not to be characterized by the rates at which they hold students in their possession (retention) or by the rates at which students depart because they are ground down by the people, policies, and programs of the institution (attrition).

In contrast to these negative definitions, there are several positive terms that underscore the importance of the nexus of student and institutional characteristics. These terms predominate in the current literature. Described briefly earlier in this chapter, those terms and their dictionary definitions are:

- **Integration:** the combination and coordination of separate and diverse elements or units into a more complete or harmonious whole
- **Involvement:** to draw in as a participant
- **Engagement:** to gain over: win and attach

These terms are encompassed in the broader concept of student success. And indeed, the most recent and influential publications in the field include student success in their titles. Those are: *Student Success in College* (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005); *Fostering Student Success in the Campus Environment* (Kramer & Associates, 2007); and *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success* (Seidman, 2005a).

Since the mid-twentieth century, then, the approaches to and understanding of college student retention have continued to evolve in several ways. First, student retention has moved from a somewhat peripheral issue to one of major concern not only to individual institutions but to society as a whole. Second, the underlying causes of student departure are no longer attributed solely to student shortcomings. Underlying causes have evolved to the point where the complex interplay of student characteristics with institutional people, policies, and programs determines students' decisions to stay or to leave. And, as a corollary to this point, the focus has gradually shifted from assigning blame to looking for solutions.

### **A Broader Perspective on Student Success**

In spite of the evolution of terms related to student success in college, the current retention framework is based on two faulty assumptions: simplistic assumptions that confound the definition of student success. First, Habley and Schuh (2007b) and Jones-White, Radcliffe, Huesman, and Kellogg (2009) suggest that the fallacy of the simplistic definition is that it is based on the assumption that the process of achieving an educational objective is both linear and temporal. In reality it is neither. A linear process is one in which the student attends a single institution from matriculation to graduation. A study by Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002) found that 41% of college students attended more than one institution during their college career, 11% had simultaneously enrolled at more than one college,

and 32% had changed colleges at least once. Hagedorn (2005) identifies 10 enrollment scenarios that suggest that linearity is not realistic. And there are probably many more scenarios that could be identified. A temporal process is one in which events occur within a defined time frame. The likelihood of that taking place has moved from probable to possible over the past several decades as students are taking longer and longer to complete degree requirements. ACT data reveal that only 39.6% of four-year college students complete a bachelor's degree in four years and an additional 16% complete the degree in six years (2010e). In addition, 13.6% of two-year college students complete an associate's degree in two years and an additional 10% complete in four years (ACT, 2010e). Though it is convenient to believe that students enroll at only one institution, identify and commit to a program of study, take and succeed in the right combination and number of courses to earn a degree within the appropriate time frame (two years or four years), such an assumption is, indeed, ill-founded.

A second faulty assumption is that all students enter postsecondary education with a desire to complete a college degree or certificate. Although the majority of students enroll full-time with the intent to earn a degree, many undergraduate students attend college part-time, and a number of these students have specific educational objectives that do not include earning a degree. Some students come to upgrade their work skills while others come to completely retrain. Some intend to complete one or two courses that will be transferred to another institution to complete degree requirements. Still others come out of intellectual curiosity, to take a course in an area of personal interest, or to explore the possibilities for additional postsecondary education. Many of these individuals succeed yet none of them fit the linear or temporal definition of retention. In addition, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that institutional effectiveness is often judged by—and institutional reputation is often established by—a crude measure of success based on the

simplistic definition of retention as the percentage of the previous year's students who did not graduate and returned to school the following year.

But refuting this simplistic definition of retention does little to aid in the understanding of retention; rather, it only increases the complexity of the discussion. Indeed, some of the terms are conflicting or overlapping. Our review of terminology related to student departure yields no less than 21 different descriptors of student departure. Twelve of the descriptors characterize students, six focus on institutional measures, and three reflect a responsibility shared between student and institution, focusing on student success. For the sake of consistency and the economy of words, *retention* is an umbrella term that refers to the plethora of descriptors that follow. It should not be construed as the author's preferred descriptor.

The stark reality of the retention and persistence-to-degree data is that despite the considerable energy the higher-education community has expended in understanding retention and degree completion, such understanding has not resulted in a concomitant improvement in student success in college. The community can document the personal and societal benefits that accrue from a college degree. The community can identify the student, institutional, and environmental factors contributing to retention. In addition, the higher education community can pinpoint institutional interventions that contribute to retention. Yet, in spite of all that is known, there has been little change in retention and degree completion rates in more than four decades. Nearly one-third of all first-year students do not return for a second year, fewer than half of all students who earn bachelor's degrees do so within five years of high school graduation, and approximately 40% of all students who enter higher education in a given fall will not earn a degree anywhere at any time in their lives. With the additional factors of multiple ways in which students can earn college credit and the phenomena of student swirling and increased time to degree, it is not likely



that the future holds a great deal of promise for improvements in retention or degree completion based on the existing retention framework.

Because of the faulty underlying assumptions, the existing retention framework has three major limitations. The first limitation is that institutions are held accountable for retention and degree-completion outcomes over which they have some influence but very little control. Because student success is fraught with complexities, policymakers and resource allocators rely on accountability measures that sink to the lowest common denominators. How many students matriculate? How many students are retained? How many students graduate? How long did it take to earn their degrees?

The second limitation is that the traditional retention framework fails to take into account the significant variety of institutional types that make up the American higher education system. Theoretically, all students who have a high school diploma or have completed the GED have access to postsecondary education. Because this is the case, first- to second-year retention and degree completion rates vary greatly based on mission, selectivity, and the academic ability of students who enroll. Once again, accountability measures undergirding the traditional retention framework fail to take into account this institutional diversity.

The third major limitation is that institutions compare themselves and compete with other institutions. Students are a renewable yet finite commodity. Thus, institutional success is predicated on how well a college attracts and keeps students. Those who matriculate elsewhere or students who leave the college represent loss but evince little concern for their success as students. The traditional retention framework creates three basic comparisons and concomitant mindsets. The first is “we are better than average,” which provides little stimulus to change. The second mindset is “we are about average,” which may or may not stimulate change. And the third, “we are below

average,” should stimulate change. Though comparisons with peer group institutions may be useful as broad indicators, such comparisons do little to create a road map that leads to continuous improvement.

Accountability measures based on antiquated and faulty assumptions on how students pursue higher education have done little to advance college success. Retention and persistence-to-degree rates have not changed appreciably in the last five decades. We believe that campus-based retention efforts must focus on programs that support learning, motivation, and career development. Those programs are assessment/course placement, academic advising, learning support, and first-year transition—programs that have stood the test of time and continue to have a significant impact on student success. Finally, we believe that it is time to jettison the notion that student success in college is confined to a single institution of first enrollment. The remainder of this book is organized around these beliefs.