

FOCUS ON: HIGHER EDUCATION

Colleges Try to Unlock Secrets to Student Retention**Experts examine findings for keys to school success**By [Caralee J. Adams](#)

Record numbers of students flocked to college campuses this fall with high hopes of obtaining what many say is the new prerequisite for a middle-class life: a college degree. But the harsh reality is that little more than half those bright-eyed college freshmen, on average, will actually finish.


The gap between access and completion has put a new focus on ramping up retention—the percentage of freshmen who return to the same institution for a second year of college. And that’s a task, observers say, for precollegiate educators as well as their college counterparts.

Just as there are multiple reasons for dropping out—from money to academics to lack of direction—there is a range of initiatives emerging to boost college completion. Counselors and mentors are texting students to remind them of tests, connecting families with financial-aid sources, and guiding students through the social transition to college.

Many programs are showing promise, but they often are short term and light touch rather than intensive, said Susan Scrivener, a senior associate at MDRC, a New York City-based research organization. “It’s important to turn toward more-comprehensive, longer-lasting programs,” she said. “They have more potential to make a really big difference.”

When students fail to graduate, they lose out on tuition money and time spent pursuing a degree—and often are in student-loan debt that can set them back years. They’re also losing the potential earning power that comes with a college degree—as much as \$1 million more than someone with a high school diploma alone, according to recent research. And college dropouts cost society in potential tax contributions and unrealized creativity.

Retention rates have been relatively unchanged for decades, hovering around 67 percent. Students are more likely to return for a second year of college at four-year public or private colleges, where retention rates were about 74 percent in the 2011 [surveys conducted by ACT Inc.](#), the testing and research company based in Iowa City, Iowa. Recently, however, community colleges have shown improvement. Retention rates at two-year public colleges climbed from 51 percent in 2004 to 56 percent in 2011—the second-highest level since 1989.

The [ACT survey](#)  found colleges’ top retention strategies were: freshman seminars, tutoring

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programs, advisory interventions, mandated course-placement testing programs, and comprehensive learning-assistance centers or labs.

High School Preparation

While colleges have an obligation to serve the students they admit, many say retention problems can't be solved without help from K-12. Leaving high school unprepared for college-level work (40 percent of college students need remediation) puts students at a disadvantage and makes them more apt to leave campus before they get a degree.

Policymakers and businesses are clamoring for more rigor in high school to prepare the future workforce. And a recent survey by the College Board finds students want to be challenged, too. One year after high school graduation, more than half of students found college more difficult than expected, and many wished they had taken tougher classes in high school.

But the answer to retention is not all about academics, said Steve Schneider, a school counselor at Sheboygan South High School in Sheboygan, Wis., and the secondary-level vice president of the [American School Counselor Association](#).

"This is really about preparing kids for careers," he said. "A highly intelligent kid who goes off to college just because they think that's what they are supposed to do, ... if they don't have a sense of what they are preparing for, then they don't stay."

Mr. Schneider says high schools need to give counselors the time to help students explore career options so they enter a postsecondary program with a goal and are motivated to stick with it.

That could be hard to do. Although the American School Counselor Association recommends a 250-to-1 ratio of students to school counselors, the national average was actually 457 in the 2008-09 school year and has likely increased since then.

Indeed, when students enter community college in a specific academic or vocational program, they are more likely to complete a degree or other credential than those who don't choose a program focus, according to recent findings from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University.

Students' lack of academic preparation in K-12 and lack of commitment to earning a degree were among the top reasons for attrition, according to the ACT retention survey.

'Retention Czar'

Once students arrive on campus, colleges should assess the academic skills they need for certain classes and then get them up to speed, said Alan Seidman, the executive director of the [Center for the Study of Student College Retention](#) and a professor of education at Walden University in Bedford, N.H.

"Colleges have the moral and fiduciary responsibility to get students the programs and services to be successful," he said. "If you don't have the programs and services, don't accept them."

Institutions, however, take students who they know are not likely to succeed in order to balance the books, Mr. Seidman continued. Colleges don't always want to invest the time and work to help them, yet providing basic-skills services upfront can be more cost-effective in the long run because they help institutions retain tuition-paying students, he said. Rather than being assigned to one-size-fits all remedial classes, Mr. Seidman said, students do best when training is tailored to their specific skill needs. Retention efforts also require faculty buy-in and must continue beyond the freshman

year to truly affect completion, he said.

Keeping students on track was such a priority at **Philander Smith College** that the historically black institution hired a “retention czar.” Carla Wood said the title gave her authority and enabled her to cross boundaries to coordinate splintered efforts to meet the needs of students at the 700-student liberal arts school in Little Rock, Ark.

To convey the college’s expectations from the beginning, academic coaches have one-on-one interviews with students while they’re freshmen. An early-alert system flags students who are struggling. Tutoring is available at “academic success centers,” renamed by Ms. Wood to accentuate the positive. She also recruited faculty members to put in office hours at the center to broaden the campus commitment to retention.

Before students can leave the college, they must submit to an exit interview with Ms. Wood, who sometimes finds the intervention can change their minds.

“We try to be proactive, rather than reactive,” she said.

The retention rate at Philander Smith jumped from 51 percent in 2004 to 77 percent in 2009. The graduation rate doubled, from 16 percent to 32 percent from 2010 to 2011.

The **City University of New York** put a dent in retention rates with an innovative program launched in 2007 that so far has helped support 1,100 students to progress through school full time as a group and finish within three years. The **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP**, gives students textbooks and transportation and tuition support to remove barriers to full-time study.

Students are required to meet twice a month with designated ASAP advisers, who receive feedback from faculty members on student progress to determine if they need to be connected with tutoring or other help for them to remain on track.

“If students are struggling, counselors work with faculty and students to get help,” said Donna Linderman, the program’s director. “It’s individualized. That’s the heart and soul of the program—to help with the transition into college and use the resources available.”

After three years, 55 percent of the fall 2007 cohort graduated within three years vs. 24 percent of a comparison group. Retention rates for the fall 2009 cohort—low-income students with some remedial need—were also high: 83 percent for one year for ASAP students vs. 67 percent for a comparison group of similar students.

24/7 Help

At the **University of Virginia**, in Charlottesville, Maurice Apprey, the dean of African-American affairs and a professor of psychiatry, says success with retention and graduation of African-American students, who traditionally have lower completion rates, begins with a larger strategic model that promotes academic excellence in a culturally sensitive environment.

Peer mentors are paired with new students to help them navigate the social and cultural adjustments to campus life. And counselors advise students to take courses in the right sequence and not to load up on too many heavy courses.

“I tell students, and parents, about five times before they start school, ... if you take calculus and chemistry in the first semester, you have given me the right to lock you up and throw away the key. I use humor, but it’s a serious problem,” Mr. Apprey said. Even for the best and the brightest, it can

be a struggle to manage their classes because they need time to get used to the new environment and learning curve, he said.

Personal crises or bureaucratic barriers that keep students from progressing can sometimes be solved with specific interventions by outside partners. That's why nonprofit groups, such as **College Bound** in St. Louis, are stepping into the retention arena to help connect students with resources and teach them advocacy skills.

Trained coaches from College Bound reach out to students by text, phone, or in person at least once a week and are on call 24/7 to keep them on track.

Many students in the program have grown up in poverty, amid trauma, said Lisa Orden Zarin, the founder and chief executive officer of the 5-year-old organization. When they arrive on campus, they often are overwhelmed by the environment and don't know where to turn.

"The idea that a student is going to march over to the office of retention and self-identify is not likely," she said. "These students need invasive counseling, ... a person to trust that reaches out to them."

The first group of students served by College Bound is in its senior year of college, and 43 percent are expected to graduate in four years, 66 percent in five years, and 75 percent in six years.

"We set our sights on college graduation. Energy follows intention," Ms. Zarin said. "We're not trying anything that hasn't been proven."

'One-Stop Shop'

Money is a huge obstacle for many community college students, such as not having enough for tuition or living expenses, said Elisabeth Mason, the founder of the New York City-based nonprofit **Single Stop USA**. The organization helps students tap into all the available programs they might qualify for, including Pell Grants, food stamps, and tax credits.

Single Stop has sites on 70 community colleges across the country, paying for staff members on campus to counsel students on finances and legal issues.

"There are lots of resources and services, but they aren't coordinated," Ms. Mason said. "We seek to become a one-stop shop, where students can be comprehensively screened."

Michael Arjun, a sophomore at the University of Massachusetts Boston, credits his first-year success in part to the guidance from his mentor provided by **Bottom Line**, a nonprofit in that city that supports students through college graduation.

The mentor taught him how to check his campus account balance online so he'd stay on top of his finances and encouraged him to meet with a professor when he was failing an economics class. Without his mentor, Mr. Arjun says, he would likely have withdrawn from the class and be down a couple of credits. After talking with the professor, he had a better grasp on the subject. And he no longer sits in the back of an 80-student classroom.

Mr. Arjun added: "Now I sit in the front of the class so the teacher can get to know you."

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