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ABSTRACT

In the last 10 years community college enrollments have leveled off, bringing a new urgency to institutional efforts to retain current students. Obstacles to academic persistence include external factors such as insufficient funds, work demands, social demands, family obligations, housing or transportation problems; and internal problems such as procrastination, fear of failure, inability to ask for help, loneliness, self-doubt, value conflicts, and career indecision. To deal with these factors, college retention efforts should focus on areas such as academic stimulation and assistance, personal future building, and out-of-class faculty interaction. Additional retention activities, such as mandatory testing and placement, orientation programs, peer instruction, and integrated support services, have also been identified as helpful. Research and experience have indicated that intervention strategies that focus on specific needs of targeted groups of at-risk students, including low-income students, the academically underprepared, students with unclear academic and career goals, and reentry students, may increase retention. Current research indicates that such retention programs, comprising assessment and placement, orientation, counseling, academic advising, developmental education, and ancillary support services, can and do enhance students' chances of success. (LAL)

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**IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

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**ERIC****DIGEST**

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER

**IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

by Ron Opp and Anita Colby

In the last ten years, following a period of unparalleled growth, community college enrollments have leveled off and in some cases declined, bringing a new urgency to institutional efforts to retain current students and attract new clientele. Administrators are coming to the realization that efforts to maintain student enrollment are not only more economical than the aggressive, expensive, and labor intensive programs to replace those who drop out, but are also helpful in improving the image of the institution among policy makers, potential students, and the general public.

**OBSTACLES TO RETENTION**

Anderson (1985) points to a variety of external and internal factors which have a negative effect on a student's persistence in college. External factors include

- ..insufficient funds to meet educational, living, and personal expenses
- ..work demands and conflicts
- ..housing, roommate, or transportation problems
- ..social demands, including those made by personal relationships
- ..family obligations

Internal problems which might lead a student to drop out include

- |  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| ..procrastination and other self-management problems | ..loneliness        |
| ..inability to ask for help                          | ..self-doubt        |
| ..fear of failure                                    | ..value conflicts   |
|  | ..career indecision |

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In their review of retention research, Beal and Noel (1980) identified certain groups as the most prone to drop out of college. These groups include students who are

- .. new to postsecondary education
- .. academically underprepared for college-level work
- .. undecided about their major or their career plans
- .. returning to school after an extended period away
- .. economically disadvantaged
- .. first-generation college students

## **ACTION AREAS**

Beal and Noel (1980) identify three areas on which colleges should focus their efforts to retain students:

Academic Stimulation and Assistance. This area includes support services such as instruction in study and college survival skills, remedial coursework, bibliographic instruction, and learning laboratories.

Personal Future Building. This area encompasses efforts in career guidance, academic planning, and counseling to resolve personal problems.

Out-of-Class Faculty Interaction. Relationships that students build with faculty members out of class can be a motivating factor in remaining in college. Faculty can make themselves accessible to students by participating in extracurricular events and activities; becoming involved with student organizations; and hiring student assistants.

Cohen's (1984) analysis of retention literature adds an additional four activities to the list which show promise in increasing retention:

Mandatory Testing and Placement. Increasingly, colleges are providing testing services to assess students' skill levels in reading, writing, and mathematics. Some institutions are now requiring that all matriculating students take a battery of assessment tests and be placed in courses where they will have a chance of succeeding.

Orientation Programs. Effective student orientation programs can provide students with a program-affiliated identity early on in their college career and assist them in defining their career and academic goals. Colleges that offer this kind of orientation program usually involve counselors and other non-instructional personnel in the activity and require that certain categories of students attend the sessions.

Peer Instruction. Properly trained student tutors can be invaluable in helping other students improve their reading and writing skills, providing the kind of one-to-one assistance needed by high risk students. Tutorial services can be offered in a variety of ways -- group tutoring can help students having difficulty with a particular course, tutorial laboratories can make assistance available on an individualized basis, and dial-a-tutor programs can make services available evenings and weekends.

Integrated Support Services. This strategy brings together in a coordinated manner 1) assessment/warning systems to identify students who have basic skill needs or who are experiencing academic difficulties in a particular class; 2) remedial courses, tutorial services, and a variety of in-class basic skills presentations; and 3) a full range of counseling services.

### **RETENTION STRATEGIES**

Some obstacles to student retention are beyond the power of the college to overcome, but research and experience have shown that intervention strategies focusing on the specific needs of targeted groups of students at-risk can be effective (Noel, 1985).

**For Low-Income Students,** support programs must focus on overcoming a typically long history of academic failure and negative educational attitudes. Programs geared toward these students should include a remedial laboratory to help them develop their basic skills; a counseling unit directed at personal development, career interest identification, and goal setting; financial aid; and extracurricular activities which promote social integration.

**For Academically Underprepared Students,** remedial and developmental programs are essential. In addition, activities which enable counselors and developmental educators to meet with underprepared students and begin counseling and academic support prior to enrollment have been successful. Summer pre-enrollment orientation sessions have also provided benefits by acquainting students with the college and its services.

**For Students with Unclear Academic/Career Goals,** the services most related to retention are orientation, advising, and career assistance. Orientation can reinforce and affirm students' desire to explore different career choices. Whether provided by faculty advisers or through special units developed to deal with undecided students, advising should also reassure students that exploration is normal and healthy. Career exploration and advising programs provide the academic and occupational information needed by undecided students, and also guide them through the process of self-assessment of career interests and aptitudes.

**For Reentry Students**, a majority of the most successful retention programs attempt to integrate students into the mainstream of college activities by, for example, encouraging the development of academic and social support groups or by offering some type of mentoring from faculty or students. At the same time, the colleges provide services to meet the special needs of this group (e.g., child care, flexible administrative office hours).

## CONCLUSION

If attrition is measured in terms of the number of students who leave an institution before completing a degree, community colleges have the highest attrition rate of any segment of post-secondary education (Astin, 1975). Many argue that this definition of attrition is inappropriate for the community college, because of the institution's curricular emphasis on non-sequential, personal interest courses; marketing efforts geared toward those with a casual interest in college-level studies; and the ease with which students can enter, leave, and re-enter the community college. They further suggest that attrition at community colleges must be measured in terms of the proportion of students who accomplish the goals they were pursuing when they entered. In spite of the argument that community colleges are meeting the needs of the majority of their clients, current research does indicate that a certain amount of attrition is preventable. Programs targeting at-risk groups and utilizing the strategies described above can and do enhance many students' chances of succeeding.

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