studentsuccess

FEATURE

Part II: Institutional Strategies
Strategies to Increase Student Success

This is the second of three parts in our Institutional Strategies Series. The first article in our March issue outlined the barriers to student retention, both from the extant literature and also from interviews and surveys we've conducted through our workshops around the US and Canada. This edition's discussion focuses on programs and strategies that appear to either help OR hinder student retention on campus. In our June issue we will discuss the inherent difficulties in getting buy-in on our campuses—all campuses—from faculty, staff, administration, and yes, students.

by Dr. Watson Scott Swail

Ultimately, we all want solutions. That's what I find when I speak around the US and Canada on issues related to student retention and institutional change. The educators I meet in the field are generally talented, well-guided, and dedicated individuals searching for a way to keep students in school. The pressures from governments and institutions are pushing professionals to expand their knowledge about barriers, as discussed in Part I, and solutions, the topic of this discussion.

In Search of the "Simple Answer"

In some cases, I feel that many campus professionals are looking for the Holy Grail of student retention--the silver bullet that will solve all their problems. But even these individuals understand that no such chalice exists. Case in point: at our recent Retention Retreat in Tucson, Arizona, this past March, an individual from a Canadian institution asked a very prudent question: "Where can we find a model of how to do this?," he asked, referring to designing a framework for student retention for their campus. Before anyone jumps to the conclusion that this is a naïve question, it is ultimately the most

requested question I get from practitioners, and one that would hopefully elicit a simple answer. Unfortunately, no simple answer exists because the process and the machinery—both campus and human—are inherently complex devices.

In their book, *Student Success in College*, George Kuh and associates (2005) assert that, in their study of 20 institutions that performed better than expected with regard to student retention, there was no definite pattern in how institutions succeeded. For their institutions, "a unique combination of external and internal factors worked together to crystallize and support an institutionwide focus on student success. No blueprint exists to reproduce what they do, or how, in another setting" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associ-

ates, 2005, p. 21). While this may be a stake to the heart for many readers, Kuh et al. think differently. "The absence of such a blueprint and the fact that many roads lead to student success are, in fact, good news for those who desire to enhance student learning and engagement at their own institutions" (p. 21).

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Of the thousands of institutions in the US and Canada that serve students, I can guarantee that every one of those institutions is doing something right that positively impacts student performance and retention. This might be as simple as hiring the right professor who engages students or as complex as a redesign of their freshman curricula to match teaching pedagogy to learning styles. But everyone does something right. Conversely, those very same institutions ultimately do something uniquely wrong for students and, in many cases, I surmise they don't even know about it. For example, an institution may not provide adequate psychological counseling, or may not offer career development in concert with academic planning. Do you know what your students need and can you provide it?

For those who have heard me speak before, you may remember me making this point: all of us do some of the right things; what we don't do well is getting the right things to the right students. Institutions can provide all the resources and assistance they can muster, but if they don't identify and serve the students with the greatest need, institutions are left with simple warm and fuzzy notions that they are doing the right thing. They aren't. Remember this: students who have issues, either socially or academically, aren't those who typically knock on doors for help. These students have troubles in part because they don't always seek out the help they need. In contrast, students who excel academically and have better social/psychological skills are more likely to seek out support to give them further advantage. Thus, advantage continues to beget advantage.

For institutions, this is an important point. Practitioners must work hard and diligently to ensure that (a) the appropriate services are in place; and (b) the institution intrusively identifies and

serves students that are in need of these services.

With regard to the former, institutions must conduct an audit of what they offer and whom they need to serve. This was discussed in our January Student Success article, "Seven Guiding Questions for Student Retention." Institutions must reflect on what they currently offer and decide whether these programs and strategies fit the bill. Second, they must find what their student body needs in terms of academic and social support, especially for students who have the profiles of school leavers. The third step is to then match what the institution offers with student needs and see what fits and what doesn't. That's when identifying new possibilities enter the process.

Strategies for Improvement

When I work with postsecondary professionals, typically student affairs personnel and faculty, I often ask them to conduct a simple assignment: "List the most positive and negative experiences of your undergraduate

experience?" Exhibit 1 below illustrates examples of things that participants have said in the past meetings. Take a moment to review the Exhibit.

In reading the list, do you relate to any of the statements, either as an undergraduate student or those whom you work with now? My bet is the exhibit largely hits home. What is uniquely interesting in both the positive and negative experiences is that almost all of the comments regard the "social" or personal side of higher education. Yes, people remember either positively or negatively the academic portion of their education, but when asked for a historical perspective, ex-students focus on the community, the atmosphere, the social experience of going to college. Again, none of this is to say that the academic isn't important. That's why we go to college. And students do look for "academic growth." But the social experience is often the deciding factor in whether a student stays or leaves, succeeds or fails. See how often Exhibit 1

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Exhibit 1. Positive and Negative Experiences in College

Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences:
◆ Positive interaction with a person or activity that boosted self-confidence	◆ Relationships with key people: instructors, students, administrators
◆ Quality interactions, relationship with faculty, feeling of "connectedness"	◆ Relationships with people who didn't seem interested or prepared to handle issues
◆ Relationships with administrators, faculty, advisors, peers	◆ Processes (e.g. registration, fund disbursement, choosing and sticking with a major, department helping to connect student to real job options/career path)
◆ Connecting with some group (every person at our table connected with a different group)	
◆ Connecting with other students and/or faculty in and out of the classroom	◆ Isolation; not feeling connected
◆ Social activities	◆ Bias
◆ Academic growth	◆ Lack of communication and support on campus
◆ Engaged, meaningful connections (personally, with peers or superiors, academically, etc.)	◆ Unsupportive environment—faculty, staff, institutional roles/processes
◆ Encouragement: intervention by instructors, advisors, sense of growth	◆ Sense of failure
	◆ Interaction with poor faculty
◆ Interaction with outstanding faculty/staff	◆ Institutional processes not meeting student's needs

refers to "connections," "isolation," and "relationships."

In March, Part I introduced the geometric framework for student retention (see below). In short, the framework provides a visual to understand the interaction of students (through their cognitive and social attributes) and institutional factors. Student persistence or retention occurs when there is an "equilibrium" in these forces: a balance of all factors—cognitive, social, and institutional. Going back to Exhibit 1, we need to strongly consider the impact

of social circumstances and situations on student behavior. These include student-faculty interaction, social clubs and get-togethers, concerts, study groups (combination of academic and social), and so on. Your institution surely does all of this now, to some degree. The big questions looming here are (a) do you do enough to encourage these activities or opportunities, (b) do you do them well, and (c) are you getting those students who desperately need the support involved?

Discussing strategies is difficult because it is a huge area to cover. Strategies for what? Student retention? OK, do we want to focus by department, or is this an issue for a certain student population on campus? Do we feel this is an issue related mostly to student services, or is financing a major deterrent to persistence and degree completion?

If you are looking for a more academic description of what institutions can do, I'll refer you to two sources on our **studentretention.org** website. The first is the Retention 101 section of our website, available at:
www.studentretention.org/retention101.html.

Second is my book, *Minority Student Retention in Higher Education*, also available for free download at:
www.studentretention.org/publications.html.

In my discussions, I often split items into six areas: recruitment and admissions, student services, academic services, financial aid, curriculum and instruction, and leadership and institutional change. It is difficult to provide much information in a short piece like this, but beyond the references above, let me share with you what people have said in our seminars about what they believe works on campus to increase student retention. Future issues of *Student Success* will discuss these core areas to a greater degree.

1. Recruitment and Admissions. Typically, the first contact that a student has with a postsecondary institution is in the recruitment and/or admissions office. It is imperative that staff at this stage are adequately trained to deal professionally-yet-comfortably with students. Three core areas to consider here are:

a. <u>Student recruitment/identification</u>. What are you doing to work with students in your feeder schools? Are you providing adequate information? In a timely manner? Are you sending graduates, students, staff, or faculty to schools? Is your staff working in concert with middle and high school counseling staff? Do you conduct joint programs, such as pre-college academic outreach efforts, with feeder schools?

b. <u>Admissions processes</u>. We construct admissions processes almost like a

science, with the emergence of enrolment management software and techniques. But many students require the hands-on approach to admissions, allowing multiple approaches for discussion, including email, phone, and face-to-face contact. Does your admission process allow for non-traditional evaluation of students, especially with respect to extracurricular activities and challenging backgrounds? Do you work with the student to determine whether you are the best fit for him or her? And do you provide students with information on transfer policies to and from your institution?

c. <u>Orientation</u>. This is a critical juncture for students. Institutions that carefully plan and make this a positive, meaningful period for students seem to reap the rewards of that preparation. Some institutions blow this off as just another thing to get through; often students think the same thing. But this can be a fun, extraordinary experience when done well. Also, orientation doesn't only include the "event," but also other activities before and after that help students acclimate to the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of the institution.

2. Financial Aid. The financial aid office is typically the second place of contact for students. For many, their findings at this stage can necessitate a go/no-go decision for their education future. Here are areas where institutions can focus:

a. <u>Training/Counseling</u>. As with recruitment and other service areas, your staff requires appropriate training not only in financial aid content, but in dealing with diverse students and families. This is a very stressful area for families, and professional staff must be able to put students and families at ease and

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provide them with the essential knowledge required to make informed decisions.

b. <u>Grants/Scholarships</u>. With a huge push toward merit-based aid at the institutional level, institutions must strive to ensure that students with financial need get the support they need to persist. Unmet need is a huge issue in student retention, and students shouldn't be forced to leave because of money.

c. <u>Loans</u>. A necessary but unwanted form of student support, students must be encouraged to take on a prudent level of loan burden to support their education and career goals. But institutions must consider who they are loading up with loans and who is getting institutional aid in the form of grants. There must be a good balance that offers relative affordability for all students.

d. <u>Assistantships/Workstudy</u>. Assistantships and work study jobs are excellent opportunities for students to earn money and work in an area that encourages study and learning. Research shows that when students work <u>on or near campus</u> approximately 15 hours a week, there is a positive impact on retention and academic growth.

3. Student Services. Perhaps one of the most important areas on today's campus, student services must identify students with non-academic needs and provide sufficient resources to support their academic and social growth.

a. <u>Campus Climate</u>. Students often leave because they don't feel comfortable or welcome. While all parts of a campus are responsible for the "climate" of the institution, student services must provide leadership to ensure the right things are happening to create a supportive atmosphere for learning and personal growth.

b. <u>Accessibility/Transportation</u>. Students, especially those who must commute, must have viable options for transportation to and from the campus. Are there appropriate parking or bus routes? Are classes provided at times convenient to students, rather than convenient to faculty? Are classes provided in consecutive semesters to allow students to finish off their programs without having to wait for a certain class to be offered again?

c. <u>Housing</u>. On-campus housing comes in a variety of styles and conditions. Is your housing both affordable and "livable?" Students require housing that is comfortable, affordable, and provides an excellent opportunity for growth and maturation. Are there programs within housing units to assist students both academically and socially? Are these programs effective?

d. <u>Counseling</u>. Does your institution provide proactive counseling for students who have specific, if not special, needs? More students require psychological and social counseling than ever, and institutions must provide support to allow students to focus on academics. But offering counseling isn't enough; institutions must seek out those who need it.

4. Academic Services. The classroom is where students are instructed, but it is often outside the classroom where learning occurs. An institution must be prepared to provide adequate support or "safety nets" for students to learn the content.

a. <u>Academic Advising</u>. Are students given suitable advisements by either faculty or other staff regarding the academic direction and course-taking patterns needed for degree completion? Are they taking ad-

equate loads correlated to their ability? Advising is a very important part of student retention, and many institutions do a less-than-acceptable job.

b. <u>Supplementary Instruction</u>. Providing extra opportunities to practice content and is important for many students. Many institutions utilize the SI approach (Supplemental Instruction) developed out of the University of Missouri-Kansas City back in the 1970s, which has been empirically found to have dramatic impact on the academic success of students. But there are many forms of supplementary instruction that institutions can do beyond SI.

c. <u>Tutoring/Mentoring</u>. Providing tutoring and mentoring is another mode of supplementary instruction. Individual, group, and peer mentoring can be effective methods of increasing the academic prowess of students, but it is, ultimately, labor intensive and costly. Still, there are few strategies that have the impact of direct tutoring to students. Mentoring, by faculty and peers, provides more than the academic content; it illustrates the work ethic and other important aspects of success to students.

d. <u>Research Opportunities</u>. As with work study noted in financial aid, research and experiential opportunities in one's major academic area help students relate content to the real world, further embedding learning.

e. <u>Pre-College Programs</u>. Colleges can support future learning by helping secondary students along the way. Many colleges work with secondary schools through federal (e.g., TRIO and GEAR UP), state, or institutional programs. These not only help students become academically prepared and gain "college knowledge" (e.g., learning about college

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and what is required), but also help with recruitment.

f. <u>Bridging Programs</u>. Many students can be successful when the institution provides bridging programs to soften the orientation of the college. Bridging programs occur after high school graduation and before the fall schedule begins, and provide academic support and acculturation to students, affording them the opportunity to "ramp up" to speed for the fall semester. This is a valuable tool when targeted appropriately at students with the greatest need.

5. Curriculum & Instruction. It seems that only a small percentage of institutions take the role of teaching and learning with students with the serious it deserves. Here are some of the areas that institutions must consider:

a. <u>Curricula Review & Revision</u>. Is your curricula in various disciplines up to date? Are professors and other instructional staff teaching in a parallel manner commensurate with the requirements for the course? It is often found that course curricula differs greatly from instructor to instructor, even in the same course on the same campus. Is this true at your campus or are there standards in place?

b. <u>Instructional Strategies</u>. Students learn in a variety of ways, and instructional staff should consider this in the development of teaching pedagogy for class. Teaching should utilize a variety of strategies to correlate for learning styles.

c. <u>Assessment Strategies</u>. Are assessments sufficiently diversified? As with learning styles, students vary in their test-taking skills. Not all students do well on multiple choice questionnaires.

d. <u>Faculty Development/Resources</u>. Faculty and staff can't become better educators and teachers without the support of the institution. Many institutions now house "teacher" or "faculty development" centers to provide resources, such as inservice training, for instructional staff. Does yours?

6. Leadership and Commitment. A final area that impacts the five previous areas is the level of commitment and leadership on campus. Institutions without powerful leadership in support of student retention and success rarely succeed. Conversely, those with strong leadership often do.

a. <u>Committed Leadership</u>. Leadership can show the direction and empower others to work toward shared goals. But to succeed in the retention game the president and other leaders must show that this is a priority for the institution. Is it at your campus?

b. <u>Committed Faculty/Staff</u>. Faculty and staff see a lot of faces and priorities come and go. They must be convinced that the retention effort is real and that it only succeeds with their buy-in. Planning committees and leadership must ensure that all stakeholders understand their role in the larger picture.

c. <u>Clear Expectations and Direction</u>. With leadership must come direction. Does everyone understand what the expectations are and where this effort will lead? If these are unclear, little progress will be made.

d. <u>Support to Work Toward Goals</u>. Institutional change is a difficult process. Invariably, the theory of change states that risks must be taken and that staff and other stakeholders must be given the opportunity to risk and to fail. If the cost is too high, then these stakeholders will not take the risk. Leadership again needs to show its support for change.

I understand this brief discussion provides only a cursory review of areas for consideration in the aim to increase student retention on campus. As stated, future issues will provide more tangible practices and strategies for consideration. However, in closing, I urge you to look at Exhibit 2 on page 6. This is a simple checklist associated with our discussion. Take this list and, from your viewpoint only, check off the boxes as to your satisfaction level with progress in the associated area <u>with respect to</u> student success and retention. Then have your colleagues do the same exercise and compare notes. If you find agreement in areas where you are all unsatisfied, that seems to be a likely place to start. Use the Exhibit as an effort to stimulate discussion on your campus.

Our third installment of the series in the next issue of *Student Success* will look at the role of leadership, planning, and implementation. As always, we appreciate your feedback and support. Let us know how we can improve our newsletter. Please email me at *wswail@educationalpolicy.org*.

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Exhibit 2. *How satisfied are you with your institution with respect to student success? Do you do enough? Can you do more, or do better?*

	Not Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1. Recruitment and Admissions	☐	☐	☐
a. Student Recruitment/Identification	☐	☐	☐
b. Admissions Processes	☐	☐	☐
c. Orientation	☐	☐	☐
2. Financial Aid	☐	☐	☐
a. Training/Counseling	☐	☐	☐
b. Grants/Scholarships	☐	☐	☐
c. Loans	☐	☐	☐
d. Assistantships/Work Study	☐	☐	☐
3. Student Services	☐	☐	☐
a. Campus Climate	☐	☐	☐
b. Accessibility/Transportation	☐	☐	☐
c. Housing	☐	☐	☐
d. Counseling	☐	☐	☐
4. Academic Services	☐	☐	☐
a. Academic Advising	☐	☐	☐
b. Supplementary Instruction	☐	☐	☐
c. Tutoring/Mentoring	☐	☐	☐
d. Research Opportunities	☐	☐	☐
e. Pre-College Programs	☐	☐	☐
f. Bridging Programs	☐	☐	☐
5. Curriculum & Instruction	☐	☐	☐
a. Curricula Review & Revision	☐	☐	☐
b. Instructional Strategies	☐	☐	☐
c. Assessment Strategies	☐	☐	☐
d. Faculty Development/Resources	☐	☐	☐
6. Leadership & Commitment	☐	☐	☐
a. Committed Leadership	☐	☐	☐
b. Committed Faculty/Staff	☐	☐	☐
c. Clear Expectations and Direction	☐	☐	☐
d. Support to Work Toward Goals	☐	☐	☐

SOURCE: Derived from Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003). *Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education.* ASHE-ERIC Reader Series. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, Inc.

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THE REVIEW

THE TOOLBOX REVISITED

The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School Through College: Clifford Adelman, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education (2006).

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education released *Answers in the Toolbox,* an analysis of the High School Beyond database conducted by Cliff Adelman. Up to that point, researchers and policymakers argued whether SAT scores or high GPA was the better predictor of "success" (whatever that meant) in college. *Answers in the Toolbox* changed all of that to focus on what students actually studied in high school in relation to finishing a bachelor's degree. All of a sudden, people woke up and realized that content counts. The State Scholars program cited its inspiration in the original *Toolbox*, and there is a direct line from such undertakings to the new Academic Competitiveness Grants. So perhaps good research can make a difference.

A few months ago, the U.S. Department of Education released the follow-up analysis to 1999's *Toolbox*. Again authored by Adelman (see interview on page 9). *The Toolbox Revisited* is a replication of his earlier work. While *Answers* used the High School & Beyond database, *Revisited* uses the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), which first surveyed 8th-grade students in 1988, and followed them up in 1990, 1992, 1994, and finally in 2000, or eight years after scheduled high school graduation. While even the NELS dataset seems dated by 2006, one must understand that it takes years to collect and code college transcripts for analysis. As with the first study, this one relies heavily on transcript studies, be-

cause, as Adelman gleefully notes, regardless of what students may say on a survey, "it is what they *do* that counts" (p. 10)." For *Revisited,* Adelman painstakingly built the NELS postsecondary history files from scratch with nearly 16,000 transcripts collected by NCES, and, in the process, was able to fill in previously missing information on the high school transcript files. The students in the NELS study with complete high school and postsecondary transcripts formed a weighted pool of about 1.19 million for the *Revisited* analysis.

Adelman makes clear that this study, like the former, is not about high school graduation, college access, or college persistence. It is, quite simply, "a question about completion of academic credentials—the culmination of opportunity, advisement, choice, effort, and commitment" (p. 9). In the past, Adelman has made clear that what matters is the end result, not what happens in between. Thus, high school is an important predictor of what is to come for most students down the road.

Findings

The findings of *Revisited* largely mirror those of its predecessor. Academic intensity, Adelman's term for the rigor of the high school curriculum, is still the most important variable in the pre-collegiate history of a student. And mathematics is the kingpin. *Revisited* points out that not only is getting beyond Algebra 2 in high school a fulcrum of future academic success, but earning credits in college-level mathematics after crossing the matriculation line is equally as important. Students who earn more than 4 of these credits increase the probability of completing a bachelor's degree by 11 percent.

At the postsecondary level, Adelman found that students who earn less than 20 credits by the end of the first calendar year have difficulty completing their degree. He also uncovered the misconception noted by Swail in *Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education* (2003) regarding the mass exodus of students during the first year of postsecondary study. As Adelman finds, 90 percent of traditional college students wind up at some postsecondary institution the following academic year. He does note that 60 percent of students participate in summer programs. *Revisited* also reports that one-third of students who started at a four-year college earned a BA at that same institution within four years; that percentage goes up to over half if we allow them to graduate from a different institution; and given 8.5 years after high school graduation, 70 percent of students who started at a four-year institution graduated with a bachelor's degree.

Policy Implications

Based on the statistical analysis in *Revisited*, Adelman offers five factors which might improve degree completion. The first focused on the 20-credit line during the first calendar year of enrollment, a marker he demonstrates even part-time students can reach through a combination of dual-enollment while in high school and use of summer terms. Second, schools should review no-penalty withdrawals and no-credit repeats as they result in too many students taking too many bad turns. Third, better use of the summer term would help students and ease the schedule burden for the

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INTERVIEW - Dr. Clifford Adelman

Dr. Clifford Adelman is a senior research analyst with the U.S. Department of Education. He is the author of the recently released Education Department report *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School Through College* (reviewed on page 8). In his 27-year career at the Department, Dr. Adelman has published other important works, including *Women at Thirtysomething: Paradoxes of Attainment* (1991), *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000*, and *A Parallel Postsecondary Universe: the Certification System in Information Technology* (2000). Dr. Adelman's work is highly respected and he is known for calling it as it is, as he does here in *Student Success.*

1. What were the most striking differences you noticed between the cohort of students from the original Toolbox study and the group from the Toolbox Revisited?

Demographic changes and second-language background. It's both Latinos and Asians. What you have to do is to distinguish those who are truly non-native speakers of English from those who come from second language households from those who are truly English monolingual.

- High school background: No matter what they say, the math profile was a lot better.
- Postsecondary participation: big jump in elementary "access."
- Postsecondary behavior: summer-term participation—busting the academic calendar open.
- Postsecondary behavior: even more complex attendance patterns.

2. The Toolbox revisited revealed that while a higher number of high school seniors of all race/ethnic groups continue their education today as compared to a decade ago, gaps in educational opportunity still remain. What areas of the educational system are most in need of improvement?

The opportunity gaps lie in secondary school offerings, with low-SES students and Latino students, in particular, affected. And it's not enough to count AP course offerings: you have to identify the *road* to AP. If there is no road, there is no way AP programs can be sustained in a high school or school district.

The key marker that separates access from true participation is the 20-additive-credit-line by the end of the calendar year following initial enrollment. The keys to getting there involve:

- Early tracking and tough guidance/advisement, starting at the end of grade 9;
- Tough guidance also means making sure kids leave at the end of each school day with books, notepads, and pencils to do their homework. You don't want to see kids hanging around school yards or getting on buses with nothing in their hands.
- Administering college placement tests focused on reading skills at the beginning of grade 10;
- Follow-up (to analysis of placement test results) creative reading improvement add-ons, conducted by IHEs, that carry over into the presentation of math word problems;
- At least one–and preferably two—real dual-enrollment courses prior to high school graduation—enough to give the student 6 additive credits on arrival;
- Aggressive recruitment so that there is no delay in entry; shoot for entry in the summer term, with at least 3 additive credits scheduled for that period;
- By the fall term, if all goes well, the student will have 9 additive credits and sufficient momentum to cross the 20-credit line, even if they attend part-time.

3. In terms of increasing quality at post-secondary institutions, you recommend that schools make their expectations of students clear and change their drop/add policies. What other advice do you have for institutions that want to serve their students better?

Let's get it straight about what conveying expectations means: it's putting examples of lower division course assignments, examinations, labs, etc. on Web sites, in promotional literature, and in workshops for high school teachers, principals, and guidance counselors.

After the students arrive, it means:
- More assiduous monitoring of progress in gateway courses.
- Regular e-mail contact, even if only to ask, "How are you doing?"
- Training in money-management as part of orientation.
- Don't stop monitoring at the end of the first year–the second is just as important.

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4. You have often voiced your dissent at the use of graduation rates as a measure of institutional excellence. Given that many postsecondary systems lack the ability to track students within the state and beyond the state, what data should we be looking at for measuring institutional and system performance?

Let's get some principles straight first:

- Every school can–and should–differentiate accounts of persistence and degree attainment by age of students at entry. Your daughter and your brother-in-law live on different planets and show different life trajectories, and it is neither fair nor accurate to put them in the same analytical bin.
- Don't tell anyone that institutions or states cannot track their postsecondary populations. They can do it if they want to, first, through cooperative institutional agreements in-state, and then through the National Student Clearinghouse. No, these steps aren't perfect, but they sure help construct an alternative ledger for persistence and graduation tallies.
- And for principles: if all you track are persistence and graduation, (a) use the academic calendar year as your base period, and not just the fall term, and (b) include everybody, and not just those who enter full-time (particularly because a chunk of those full-time students become part-time within a month by virtue of course withdrawals).
- There's a lot more to institutional and system performance than credentialing. The business of IHE's is the distribution of knowledge and skills, so you need some indicators of the stuff of learning to persuade anyone that you are conducting your business. As indicators, I would want to know:

- As a measure of the communication skills of your students, what proportion completed a writing course *beyond* English Comp, such as technical writing, creative writing, journalism, writing for the media.
- As a measure of quantitative skills, what proportion of your students completed at least one course in college-level math, no matter what their previous math achievement.
- As a measure of global preparedness, what proportion of your students have (a) demonstrated at least intermediate-level competence in a language other than English, and (b) taken at least two courses in international studies or international dimensions of their disciplines.
- The proportion of your students who have completed internships, clinical externships, co-op placements, etc. in their fields.

Every institution and system can identify a set of measures such as these to mark the topology of their student's accomplishments in the fundamental business of higher education. Community college occupational programs will have different markers, but they can be just as persuasive—and at least indicative that the institution is paying close attention to what students are actually learning.

5. The Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) started in 2002 with a sophomore cohort, and followed up in 2004 with a senior survey. Do we foresee a Toolbox III six years hence?

Toolbox III? We won't be able to do it until the ELS-02 postsecondary transcripts come in and are coded and released. These data will not be available until 2014. Between now and then we have to train more analysts to use these data sets. Very few can do it today. So folks, start practicing now.

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George Mason University

Recently, George Mason University (GMU) was singled out by the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project for its exemplary ability to engage and retain its students through graduation. Conducted by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, the DEEP project's results were documented a new book, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*, which examines the programs, practices and policies of 20 postsecondary, 4 year institutions that exhibit above average retention rates.

Initially founded as the University of Virginia's Northern Virginia University Center, GMU has come a long way from its roots. Opened in September 1949, the school was recognized as a four-year degree granting institution in 1968 and became independent from UVA in 1972. Today, GMU enrolls a total of 27,000 students, but remains focused on its undergraduate population through an emphasis on teaching quality, communication, technology, and use of community resources.

Specifically, *Student Success in College* highlighted aspects of GMU's culture and programs that significantly and positively affected student engagement - no easy task at a school where 50 percent of its 16,000 undergraduate students are transfers. Creating a cohesive student body, while still celebrating diversity is a constant challenge for the school. In order to address diversity issues on campus, GMU is an active affiliate of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), a non-profit leadership training organization based in Washington DC. NCBI trains students to make diversity work in the classroom by leading and facilitating discussions related to diversity and social justice. All students in University 100 classes and those enrolled in the New Century College participate in NCBI events.

One advantage GMU has over other institutions is its location in Washington D.C. Students have access to a unique pool of intellectual, social, and political resources. GMU strives to capi-

The campus of George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. GMU is one of 14 public four-year institutions in the Commonwealth, and is differentiated from the others by its outstanding men's basketball team.

talize on its proximity to these resources by sponsoring service projects, hosting cultural events such as International Week, and creating academic programs centered around experiential learning. The internet also plays a significant role in GMU's efforts to connect students with faculty, staff, and the surrounding community.

A vital part of GMU's success is rooted in its dedication to quality instruc-

tion supported by technology. To promote innovative and effective teaching, GMU established the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) and the Instructional Resource Center (IRC). Through the CTE website, professors can access resources for teaching, sign up for workshops, and share teaching advice with other professors. Professors are encouraged to acknowledge diverse

learning styles and use a variety of teaching methods to address those differences. The ITC, along with the Student Technology Assistance and Resource Center (STAR) and Technology Assistance Program (TAP), seeks to help professors integrate technology into their teaching. The ITC offers a range of services from guides on how to use equipment in the classroom to instructions on teaching a distance education course. The STAR

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Center provides assistance to students, faculty, and staff in learning how to use technology. The TAP program trains undergraduates to assist faculty and staff with computer technology in exchange for academic credit and hands-on learning experience.

To further enhance the quality of its instruction, in 1984 GMU began actively recruiting distinguished faculty dedicated to the education of undergraduates from institutions such as Harvard and Yale through the Robinson Scholars program. GMU currently has 12 Robinson scholars working in areas of study from philosophy to Chinese.

In 2001 GMU revamped its academic advising structure by combining the offices of Student Academic Affairs (SAA) and Academic Support and Advising Services (ASAS) to form Student Academic Affairs and Advising (SAAA) in order to more adequately address the school's retention issues. By merging the two offices, GMU was better able to target at-risk students, such as transfers and undeclared no-preference majors, as well as provide basic advisory services to all undergraduates. Another important feature of SAAA is its location in the George W. Johnson Center. Identified by Student Success in College as a key component of GMU's culture due to its central location in the middle of campus, the Johnson Center provides an easily recognizable place for students to access academic services, such as tutoring and career counseling.

Additional practices instituted at GMU with at-risk students in mind include a required series of assessments administered to all students enrolled in University 100 courses in order to evaluate students' strengths and weaknesses. University 100 courses are offered to all incoming freshmen and address issues related to student success in college. The results of the assessments are posted on the web, as are faculty evaluations so that students may access them while reg-

istering for classes. Students who do not do well in their first semester are contacted by their faculty advisors as well as SAAA to discuss ways to bring the student's grades up.

GMU uses technology to offer students access to online mentoring and advising. First-year students considering specific majors can be paired with upperclassmen to discuss departmental expectations and requirements, workload, and potential career choices. The Academic Advising Center provides "Ask an Advisor" section on its Web site for students who are undeclared, pre-med or changing majors.

Academically, GMU is particularly adept at fostering hands-on, student focused learning and the development of communication skills, particularly through writing. In 1995, the University created the New Century College (NCC) to allow students and faculty the opportunity to interact on a more intimate level. The NCC offers two programs: The First Year Experience (FYE) and the Integrative Studies degree program. All incoming freshmen are eligible to enroll in FYE, an alternative, year-long, general education program that fulfills GMU's core requirements. Students enrolled in the program meet Monday through Thursday from 10 am to 3 pm each week. The purpose of the FYE is to create small learning communities where teachers collaborate with one another and students benefit from interaction with faculty and experiential learning opportunities. After completing the program, FYE students may choose to enter the NCC's Integrative Studies program. In the Integrative Studies program, students are once again placed in learning communities that aim to bring the fragmented information presented in unconnected courses into one unified experience. Students are encouraged to be active in their own learning experience. Classes often cover several different subjects, are team-taught and

theme-based, and structured to foster communication between faculty, community members, and students.

A highlight of the curriculum at GMU is the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program, established in 1978 and initially funded by the Northern Virginia Writing Project. WAC places an emphasis on developing the writing skills of every student. Freshmen must take a general composition class, while upperclassmen are required to complete an advanced composition and writing-intensive course. Professors in every field of study are encouraged to integrate writing assignments into their classes. To facilitate its mission, WAC publishes a Writing@Center newsletter, holds faculty development workshops and brown bag discussions, as well as supports the University Writing Center. Particularly talented students have the opportunity to become Peer Tutors. Peer Tutors may later become Writing Fellows through the Center for Teaching Excellence's Apprenticeship program. Through the program, 15 students per semester are paired with a faculty member to work on a guided project. The student receives $1000 for their work plus $100 for expenses.

Finally, student participation is key not only in the learning process, but also in general administrative decision making. To that end, GMU allows students to have a say in how they want to be served by the institution. GMU has several student advisory committees that communicate with the student body and report their findings to the administration. In the end, GMU is successful because it focuses on the needs of its students.

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most popular courses in postsecondary studies. Fourth, encourage students not to delay entry into higher education. Those that do face a more difficult path of success. And finally, Adelman concludes with his message that academic intensity in high school matters. "If students cannot read close to grade level, the biology textbook, the math problems, the history documents, the novel—all will be beyond them. And if high schools are not offering a full academic curriculum, there is little hope" (p. xxvi).

The Toolbox Revisited is yet another powerful tome of analysis by one of the nation's best analysts. This is a must read for those in the policy trenches. The pdf version can be downloaded at:

*www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/
toolboxrevisit/toolbox.pdf*

UConn Recieves First Annual EPI Annual Outstanding Retention Program Award

The Retention and Graduation Task Force at the **University of Connecticut** has been chosen as this year's recipient of the Educational Policy Institute's Outstanding Retention Program for 2006. UConn will formally accept the award at this year's award luncheon at **RETENTION 2006** in Las Vegas on May 23. The next issue of Student Success will be devoted to a discussion of UConn and their efforts over the past five years to increase retention and persistence to degree at their institution. Stay tuned.

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