



Fostering Student Success: Vision, Emotion and Connectivity

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When it comes to student retention, it turns out that what we thought we knew *ain't necessarily so*. Current research reveals that many key assumptions on which we have often based enrollment management practices need to be challenged and modified.

Take, for instance, the traditional institutionally-centered focus on retention. When we as college CEOs and senior enrollment (admissions) managers turn this issue around, examining persistence from the student's standpoint, we enhance existing perspectives about what fostering students success, says Dr. Joe Pace, a nationally-known specialist in student retention.

Institutions have often acted on the knowledge that students are most vulnerable to dropping out within their first 90 days of enrollment by creating success-centered classes, First Year seminars and the like. Such courses are helpful in stemming attrition, but they don't go far enough. When we delve further into what motivates students to persist until graduation, we find that "it is total employee commitment and involvement that makes the difference," Pace notes.

Further, we have often placed most responsibility for retention upon faculty or enrollment management staff, rather than fostering connectivity across the board. All employees need to be models, mentors and monitors. The stronger the connections they foster with students, the higher the rate of student persistence.

The reverse is also true. "Unconscious saboteurs" – those who (often unknowingly) create negative enrollment outcomes -- can undo the best work of even model mentors. "It takes 11 positive mentor models to counteract

the influence of one negative," Pace notes.

Thus, it is critical for institutions to train *all* employees in what Pace calls "the edupreneurial spirit," focusing on the student or customer-oriented side of higher education.

Next, institutions too often create a disconnect between students expectations and reality, emphasizing rational choices rather than emotion in the choice to remain enrolled or to drop out. College presidents and senior leadership need to embrace the "heart" or "hot button" strategies based on current cognitive behavioral research to assist students in persisting. Students who persist tend to have a sensory-rich vision in their minds; we want them to feel, taste and touch the goal. We may want to motivate them with a picture of the student in cap and gown holding a degree taken when he or she is a freshman. For many, it will be some other motivator, including photos with their parents, spouses and children and with them in cap and gown. Sometimes, the more humorous or audacious the imagery, the more effective. When students don't persist, it is often because their vision isn't concrete enough to take them through the rough spots.

Both i.q. and emotional intelligence are instrumental in boosting retention rates. Every employee of the college must know what has been promised by the college to its students, and everyone must work to deliver what has been promised; dreams can quickly unravel. The more employees understand about the student's "picture," the more they can support it. Research shows that emotion is involved in any type of long-term change; people do not change without it. Thus, successful retention strategies touch both the head *and the heart*.

Next, while we sometimes view successful enrollment management strategies as relying on big, bold measures, we should remember that even small changes in institutional behavior can produce measurable results over time.

You retain one student at a time, one here, another there, and before you know it, over the course of a year, your retention will have improved by 10 percent.

Finally, we must recognize that improving retention is a task that is never going to be completed. It is ongoing. People ask, "When will this retention thing be solved?" It will never be totally solved.

However, by paying scrupulous attention to students' needs and expectations (attention equals retention), hiring and promoting instructors with "intelligent hearts," training "edupreneurs" and "touching the heart button," we can foster greater persistence, resulting in measurably higher retention.

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